

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JUNE

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DEATH OF A DEAD MAN

The New MIKE SHAYNE Novelet

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE FRIGHTENED SKY-GIRL

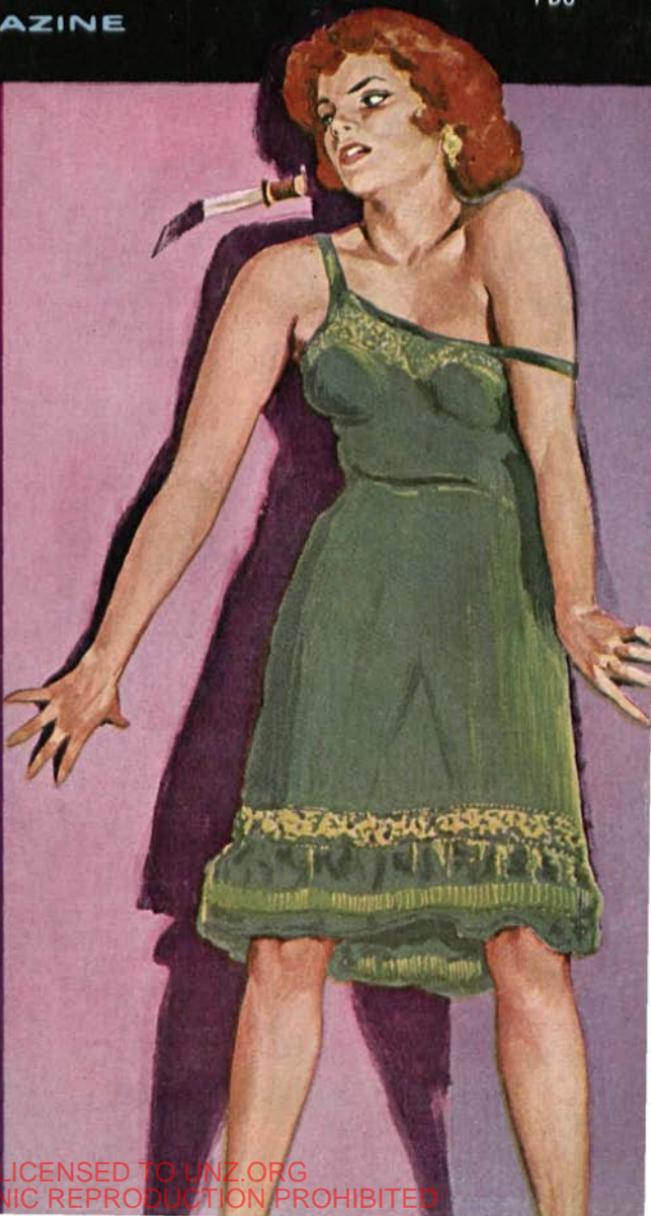
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June-63



JUNE, 1963.

Vol. 13, No. 1

A NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET
DEATH OF A DEAD MAN
By BRETT HALLIDAY

It was the eeriest crime puzzle Shayne had ever been confronted with. A slain man had walked right out of the past to die again on his enemy's doorstep 2 to 34

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LEO MARGULIES
Publisher

CYLVIA KLEINMAN
Editorial Director

WILLIAM SCOTT
Associate Editor

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THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

Shayne had never before encountered quite so startling a crime paradox. The slain man had no right to be alive at the time of his death . . . because someone else had killed him!

By **BRETT HALLIDAY**



MICHAEL SHAYNE jammed on the brakes of his car, his eyes glinting with sudden anger. In the dark summer night the other car was slanted across the highway in his path at the center of the small drawbridge. Shayne got out of his car and strode toward the stalled vehicle.

The car was a four year old black sedan. For a moment Shayne

thought there was no one in it. Then he stepped closer and saw a figure slumped over the wheel. The car was jammed against the guard rail of the small bridge. Apparently the driver had passed out for some reason, perhaps a heart attack, and the car had slewed across the bridge and been stopped by the guard rail.

The car's engine was still run-

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ning, giving it even more the look of a tragic accident. But it was not an accident. It was a trap. Shayne, becoming careless, reached through the conveniently open car window to raise the head of the slumped man. The man came to life and gripped the detective's arm.

A second figure appeared from the shadows of the drawbridge. Shayne had a glimpse of a thin, dark-haired man with a mustache. With his arm held fast Shayne could not pull free in time to defend himself.

The second man hit him on the back of the head. The blow was the work of an expert. Shayne slumped to the roadway of the bridge.

Shayne was stunned but not quite knocked out. That and the fact that the two men were in a hurry saved his life.

The other man had gotten out of the car, and Shayne had a confused recollection of seeing both men move to the edge of the bridge and back again before they slipped their hands under his armpits, lifted his big frame clear of the road, half-carried, half-dragged him to the edge of the bridge, and threw him over. The exertion wrenches a grunt from one of them.

Shayne hit the water hard. He went under. He went down and down until his feet sank into mud. For a second or two he lay unmoving on the bottom. Then, revived

by the water but still groggy, he kicked free of the mud and swam upwards, fighting against the tug of the current. His lungs seemed on fire and he was afraid for a moment that he would never make it.

He came up gasping and choking. It was pitch dark. Vaguely, he saw far-off lights that could have been the bridge in the distance. In the narrow channel of Great South Bay the tide was coming in fast. He had been carried half a mile.

Painfully, he struck out for shore. He seemed to swim weakly for hours. At last his feet touched a slippery rock and the loose gravel of a sloping beach. He fell three times before he reached solid ground and collapsed. For a long moment he lay stretched out flat on his stomach, barely breathing.

II

LUCY HAMILTON told Mike Shayne over the intercom at nineteen that morning that Alistair Finch was on the long distance phone—calling from Westhampton, Long Island. Shayne's pert, brown-eyed secretary sounded awed. She knew Shayne had known Alistair Finch a long time, and that they were old friends, although they had not seen each other for many years. But the name of the industrialist still awed Lucy.

"He sounds very nervous, Michael," Lucy said over the intercom. "Finch is always nervous,"

Shayne said, "it goes with all that money and success."

"That wouldn't make me nervous," Lucy said.

Shayne laughed. "Okay, Angel, put him on," he said, and reached for the desk phone and uncradled the receiver.

The industrialist's voice was tense with anxiety. "Mike? Thank God I got you. Can you fly up right away?"

"Whoa, Ally, one thing at a time. Fly where? Remember, I'm a Miami detective!" Shayne said.

There was a sound like a deep breath at the other end of the telephone. "Sorry, Mike. I'm at the Westhampton house, the beach cabana. I have guests."

Shayne saw a mental picture of Alistair Finch's "beach cabana." He had been a house guest there once ten years ago. The "cabana" was three stories high, had thirty-two rooms, and looked like a Newport mansion covered with ivy—which, in fact, it was. Its only claim to being a beach house was its location—on a slight elevation overlooking the water.

Finch had spent a sizeable sum just on a sunporch extension.

"Tell me the story," Shayne said.

"There isn't any story, Mike," Finch's voice said. "Just a pretty gruesome fact. I found a body in my garden. The police say he was murdered."

"How do they figure that?" Shayne asked.

"He had been stabbed three times in the back."

"I'd be inclined to agree with the police," Shayne said. "Who did it?"

Finch sighed far away. "I don't know. I've got police all over the grounds. You've got to help me, Mike. I know we've been out of touch for a good many years. But when this happened I thought of you at once."

"I'll bet you did," Shayne said drily. "Who is the man—a guest?"

"No, Mike. No one here has the least idea who he is, except—" Finch's voice hesitated.

"Do the police suspect you?" Shayne asked, abruptly.

"No," Finch said. "Mike, the man is a total stranger. He doesn't have any identification papers on him. No one knows who he is—"

Shayne was more acutely aware of the hesitation this time. "Except who?"

"Except me, Mike. But no one knows that I've ever set eyes on him before. At least, no one in this country."

"Who is he?"

Finch was very nervous now. "A man I knew in Italy, Mike—during the war. He was a Partisan leader in a unit I worked with."

"How did he get to your beach house?"

"I don't know that either," Finch said. "The last time I saw Pietro Corelli was in Italy in nine-

teen forty-four. That was nineteen years ago."

"You had no idea he was in this country?" Shayne asked.

This time there was a very deep breath on the other end of the line. "Mike, I didn't even know he was alive."

"You mean you hadn't heard from him—or anything at all about him—in nineteen years? That's not so unusual is it, Ally?"

"Mike," Finch said, "Pietro Corelli was killed by the Germans in nineteen forty-four."

Shayne let a long count of ten pass through his mind. Finch seemed to be doing the same thing on the other end of the telephone. Then Finch spoke again.

"I saw them take him," Finch said, "so did two of my men. He was shot two days later. There's no doubt at all in my mind he's been dead for nineteen years."

"Until a few days ago," Shayne said.

"Mike, I can't take anything like this. You know how important my business is and the kind of company I run. Mostly Government work. I'll pay you well, Mike."

Shayne considered his work calendar. He could hire people to cover two routine jobs. One major job he could let go for a few days.

"I'm on my way, Ally," he said.

Shayne took the first jet north after arranging for his work to be covered. Before he left he asked

Miami Police Chief Will Gentry to give him a letter of introduction to the New York Police. Shayne had met New York State Police Lieutenant Edwin "Ed" Master ten years ago in Westhampton, but Will Gentry was in a position to help him secure further cooperation from the New York authorities.

He also stopped off at Tim Rourke's office to see if he could get a file on Alistair Finch. Fortunately the man was of sufficient national importance to be of reference-file interest to a good many newspapers.

Shayne read the material on Finch on the jet north. He knew Finch, but it had been many years, and he wanted up-to-date details. Finch was president and owner of a large chemical company. He had inherited the company and his money. What Finch had not inherited was a special chemical additive for rocket fuel. The chemical was vital, and Finch had grown much richer since the war.

Finch was also a war hero. The industrialist had been a Major in the OSS behind enemy lines for most of the war. That would be where this Pietro Corelli came in, Shayne told himself. Finch had a perfect war record, and after the war had come up with his special rocket additive. Finch had a full partner—Kurt Berger, a German.

Finch also had many friends, but only a few close ones. Finch

had always mixed business and pleasure, and Shayne expected that the industrialist's business and personal friends would be at the Westhampton house.

Shayne studied the names and backgrounds of the four or five of Finch's friends who were mentioned in the material Rourke had given him. By that time his jet landed at Idlewild.

The redhead found a car waiting for him at the airport, and smiled when he saw it. With all his money, Finch had not sent a chauffeur with the car. The industrialist had remembered that Shayne preferred to drive himself.

He drove the car into New York City to Center Street, and showed a high-ranking police officer Gentry's letter. He left the building with a letter in his wallet to the State Police in Suffolk County.

Shayne drove out of the city through the Queen's Midtown Tunnel and along the Long Island Parkways. The weather was clear and warm in July. He drove with his window open and the wind blowing his thick red hair.

By the time he reached Patchogue it was night and dark. The salt odor of the sea was pleasant in the night. Shayne watched the moon rise to the south over Fire Island. Perhaps that was why his guard was down as he turned onto the drawbridge from Westhampton to Westhampton Beach and saw



the black sedan across the roadway.

III

THE MOON WAS high above the dunes when Shayne at last staggered to his feet. He stumbled through the sparse shrubbery and knee-high tangles of prickly thorns, keeping close to the shoreline until he came to the single road of Westhampton Beach. He walked slowly along the road until he

reached the "cabana" of Alistair Finch.

The big house loomed large in the night. It was blazing with light. There was a police car at the door. Shayne saw his own car, the one Finch had sent for him. They were obviously looking for him. He walked in and fell into a chair in the giant hallway.

"Mike!" Alistair Finch cried. "What happened?"

"I went for a moonlight swim," Shayne said wryly.

His grey eyes searched all the faces in the room. He did not see the men. There were seven people in the house, in addition to the police.

"What happened, Shayne," a State Police officer said.

Shayne recognized Ed Masters. Ten years was a long time, and Masters was heavier and a Captain now. But it did not surprise Mike Shayne that Alistair Finch would rate the State Police, and a Captain.

Shayne greeted the police officer and told him what had happened. Masters went away to give the descriptions of the two men who had tried to kill Shayne to his men.

"Who do you think they were?" Finch asked.

"You tell me," Shayne said. "Who knew I was coming?"

"They don't sound familiar, Mike," Finch said.

"Two more men nobody knows," Shayne said. He had the

strange feeling that Finch was lying. The red-headed detective tugged on his left earlobe and narrowed his grey eyes. "Get me a large cognac, a change of clothes, and then tell me your story."

In Finch's study Shayne, a Martel in his hand and his clothes changed, listened to Finch's story. The study was a large, book-lined room furnished with leather and polished wood. The wide window overlooked the sea where a white line of surf was clear in the moonlight.

"That's all there was, Mike," Finch said. "We were there behind the German lines up near Milan. Corelli was our Partisan leader. Gerry O'ney, Marty Maltz, and myself saw them capture him. There was nothing we could do. Corelli had planned a real suicide mission for two days after he was taken.

"Maybe he was getting careless. We heard a few days later that he had been shot. Of course, there were the usual charges of betrayal. Those Partisans were mostly Communists and they always said we betrayed them. We were cleared."

"What do you think Corelli wanted here?" Shayne said.

"I can't imagine," Finch said. "Does anyone in this house have an idea?" Shayne said. "By the way, who are your guests?"

"Not one of them knew Corelli except me," Finch said. "There

are five guests: Kurt Berger, of course; Max Helpman, one of my vice-presidents and an old friend; Sally Helpman, Max's wife; Paul Macadam, you know him, the yacht man who spends a lot of time in Florida; and Myrna Mix the actress. My wife too, of course."

Shayne went down the list in his mind. All the names had been prominent in Tim Rourke's file on Finch. They were all old friends of Finch.

"Kurt Berger's your partner?" Shayne said.

"That's right. We own all the companies together. I run the American operation and Kurt has charge of the European companies."

"Did you tell Masters that you knew Corelli?"

"Yes," Finch said. "I told him you told me to."

Shayne knew he had not told Finch to say that. But he let it pass for the moment. "Do the others know about Corelli now?"

"I told them when I told Masters," Finch said.

Shayne nodded and said, "Those other two men who were with you when Corelli was captured. Has anyone talked to them since you called me in Miami?"

"Olney and Maltz? I don't think so. I didn't mention their names to anyone," Finch said.

"Where are they?" Shayne asked.

"I'm not sure," Finch said.

"We lost touch. Olney was my radioman, a Sergeant. Marty Maltz was my second in command, a Captain. They were both good men, Shayne."

"Men can change," Shayne said. "Let's talk to your guests."

IV

THE FIVE GUESTS and Finch's wife sat in the giant living room. It was late and they seemed annoyed. Finch's wife was a tall blonde half his age. She was his third wife. Her name was Laura, and she seemed to be rather friendly with Kurt Berger, her husband's partner. She sat perched on the arm of Berger's chair.

Shayne came directly to the point. "Masters told me that the Coroner fixed the time of death at somewhere around nine o'clock last night. Berger, where were you?"

"Swimming," Kurt Berger said. "I like to swim at night."

Berger was a tall, blond man of about forty-five. He was still handsome and had all his hair. The partner of Finch was Finch's best friend, according to Shayne's information.

"You swam alone?" Shayne asked.

"Laura was with me," Berger said. Berger smiled a wolfish smile. "Mrs. Finch, I mean, Shayne. We swam from about eight o'clock until past midnight. Right, Laura?"

"Yes," Laura Finch said.

"That was a long swim," Shayne said.

"We walked on the beach, too," Berger said. "A long walk. Correct, Laura?"

"Yes," Laura Finch said.

She looked at her husband who was red in the face by now. Shayne made a note of that in his mind. He turned to Helpman.

"How about you, Helpman?"

Max Helpman was nervous. The short, dark man fidgeted on the edge of his chair. Helpman was almost completely bald. His tall, thin, acid-looking wife sat beside him and glared at Shayne.

"Max was with me all night," Sally Helpman said. "We were in our room. Do you want to know what we were doing?"

"Shut up, Sally," Max Helpman said. "We were in our room, Shayne. Sally didn't feel well and we went up right after dinner."

"Anybody else see either of you?" Shayne said.

"I don't think so," Helpman said.

"We don't usually have observers in our bedroom," Sally Helpman said.

A tall, grizzled man standing near the yawning fireplace said, "I saw you Max, about ten o'clock. You were out in the garden."

"Now you listen to me Paul Macadam," Sally Helpman began.

Paul Macadam had the shoulders of a truck-driver. A man in

his fifties, he had the lined and leathery face of a man who had spent most of his life in the open air. His hair was grey, and his blue eyes were hard and amused as he looked at Sally Helpman. The tall, hard-faced woman stared at Macadam.

"I came down for some air," Max Helpman said. "I forgot that. I wasn't down more than ten minutes."

"Ten minutes is enough," Shayne said drily. "How about you, Macadam? If you saw Helpman you were down here yourself. Suppose you tell me a little more about that."

Paul Macadam nodded. "I was down here. In fact I was down from after dinner until past midnight. I like to sit outdoors. No one saw me. I saw Max, and later I saw Berger and Laura, well after midnight. They did look like they had been swimming. But no one saw me. No alibi."

Shayne looked toward Sally Helpman. "Does that mean you were alone while your husband was down here? Did you see anyone?"

"I remained in my room, Mr. Shayne," Sally Helpman said coldly.

The tall woman had square shoulders and a low, throaty voice. Shayne liked voices like that. The tall woman was a cool person, and yet, very sexy.

Myrna Mix, the actress, giggled.

"This is fun! Ask me my alibi, Mr. Shayne. Go ahead."

Myrna Mix was over forty now, and she had never been a beauty. She was a real actress, with all the hard life and hard work and hard insides it was difficult not to think about when you called anyone that. She was tall and going to fat. She had always been a big, man-nish woman. The giggle sounded ridiculous from her.

"Where were you?" Shayne said.

"I drove into town to the summer theater," Myrna Mix said. "I didn't stay for the performance, though. That much I can't do for my admirers. They're such bad actors. So no one saw me from eight o'clock until I arrived back here about ten-thirty. Ally saw me then."

"Eight o'clock until ten-thirty to drive five miles?" Shayne said.

"I made a few stops," Myrna Mix said. "I drink, you know."

"No one saw you?"

"Not until Ally did."

Shayne looked at Finch. "Then you were downstairs, too?"

"Me?" Finch said in surprise. "I took a walk, Mike."

"On the beach?"

Finch reddened. "No, along the road. Mike, I called you!"

"So you did," Shayne said. He studied all of them for a long minute. "Well, it seems that any one of you could have killed Pietro Corelli."



V

THE NEXT DAY Mike Shayne found out that not only could all the guests have killed Corelli, but that they all could have known the dead Italian. Finch was simply the only one who *admitted* having known Corelli.

Shayne spent the morning studying the murder scene in the garden. He went to town and read the Coroner's report. The only unusual facts in the report were that Corelli's clothes were all new, and seemed to be Italian. The clothes had been wet and had smelled of salt water.

It was in the afternoon that Shayne found out that all the guests had been either in Italy or in the war at the right time.

"Yes, I was in the Wehrmacht," Kurt Berger said. "I was a Hauptmann—a Captain of Signals. I was exonerated of Nazi-ism."

"It figures," Shayne said. "Where did you serve?"

"Norway, Poland, Russia, France, and Yugoslavia."

"You got around for a Captain of Signals," Shayne said. "Italy?"

"No, not Italy," Berger said.

Helpman admitted having been in Italy. "I was in Finch's OSS outfit. I thought you knew. I didn't happen to be on the Corelli mission."

"Tell me about the betrayal charge?" Shayne said.

"The Partisans accused Finch, Olney, and Maltz," Helpman said. "One or all. There was no proof, so the charges were dropped. It came damned close to a court-martial, though. The story sounded fishy."

"I didn't know it was that serious," Shayne said.

"No one does," Helpman said. "Ally likes being a war hero. Besides, if there had been any real proof at the time, he'd be in trouble with the Government now. And his business would be hurt badly. His friends in Washington have covered up even the accusation."

Finch burst into the room at that point. The industrialist was angry. "You're a liar, Max! Those Commie Partisans accused everyone! What about Gerry Olney and Marty Maltz!"

Helpman said to Shayne, "The Partisans admitted it could have been any of the three of them."

"And how about you?" Finch said.

"I wasn't on that mission," Helpman said.

Finch laughed. "No? But you came up with a message twice. I remember very well. You could have seen Corelli and turned him in. You had plenty of chance while you were crossing the lines!"

"I never saw Corelli!"

"You knew his name," Finch said. "Maybe they picked you up and you talked, so they let you go."

"That's ridiculous," Helpman said.

Shayne did not believe Berger when Berger said he had never been in Italy. He asked Captain Masters to check with the German Government. Masters agreed, and said he would try, but that would take time. Masters had located Olney and Maltz, but had not reached them yet. Olney lived in Connecticut, and Maltz in Chicago.

The other three guests turned out to have interesting pasts also. Myrna Mix, the famed actress, had been touring Italy in a USO Show at the exact time of Corelli's capture. Her show had gone close to the front lines, and had remained on tour for months.

Sally Helpman had been a nurse in a field hospital near the front lines. She had met Max Helpman during the last year of the war, and they had been mar-

ried by a chaplain at the hospital.

Paul Macadam had been a Lieutenant Colonel with an Intelligence unit just behind the lines across from Milan.

"All right," Macadam admitted, "I knew about Corelli. In fact I knew about the charge of betrayal. But I never met Corelli. As a matter of fact, I can tell you something more. When Corelli was captured a hundred thousand good American dollars went with him!"

Alistair Finch was furious when Shayne faced him with the omission in his story. Finch had said nothing about the money.

"Look, Mike," Finch said, "there wasn't any money. I'm sure of it."

"Maybe," Shayne said.

Finch was beginning to smell very bad to the red-headed detective. It would not be the first time that a guilty man had hired him to try to make himself look innocent.

"Damn it, Mike, Finch said, "those Partisans *always* said every mistake was a betrayal, and that there was money involved. If Corelli had that kind of money from us, I'd have known it. If any money changed hands it was the Partisans who profited. Those Partisans probably betrayed Corelli themselves. They'd have betrayed their own mothers for a hundred dollars."

Shayne was about to point out that Finch was protesting too much when Captain Masters came

into the room. Masters was grim.

"Anyone here know a Martin Maltz?" Masters said.

"I do," Finch said.

"You did," Masters said. "We just found his body out in the bushes."

VI

MARTY MALTZ had been stabbed. The Coroner said it was with the same kind of weapon that had been used in the earlier slaying. A long, thin knife. No one knew what Maltz had been doing in Westhampton.

"I didn't know he was anywhere near," Finch said.

"Neither did I," Helpman said.

"I did not know the man," Berger said.

"Sure you knew Marty, Kurt," Finch said. "I introduced you a few years ago when Marty came to the reunion of the old outfit. Remember?"

"Of course," Berger said. "I had forgotten. He seems to have changed."

"Lost most of his hair," Finch admitted.

"He's lost more than that now," Captain Masters said grimly.

After they had taken Maltz's body away, Shayne stood on the curving driveway of the big house and tugged on his left earlobe. The big detective ran his hand through his thick red hair. None of the guests, of course, had a real alibi.

for this murder. Why had Maltz been killed?

"Why did Maltz come here?" Shayne asked Masters.

"We were looking for him," Masters replied. "Our check found he was away on a trip. His wife thought he was in New York on business."

"What about the other man, Olney?" Shayne said.

"He doesn't know anything. Connecticut police checked," Masters said. "He hasn't been away from home in six months."

"Maybe they didn't ask the right questions," Shayne said.

Shayne decided to visit Gerry Olney, ex-Sergeant of OSS. He borrowed the car from Finch and drove off early next morning. The drive across Long Island was uneventful. But Shayne enjoyed the changing scenery as he passed from the marsh and sand of the South Shore to the flat farmlands further inland and then to the wooded and hilly North Shore.

He drove into Port Jefferson a half an hour before the ferry was ready to sail for Bridgeport, and he had a side-car in an elegant bar near the ferry dock. On the ferry the detective left his car to go and lean on the forward rail and watch the high white cliffs of the North Shore fade behind as the ferry rolled lightly on the water of the open Sound.

Shayne's was the second car off the steep ramp in Bridgeport. He

drove fast along the Connecticut parkway until he reached New Haven. Olney was in his office when Shayne arrived at the house. Olney's wife called him and Olney said he would come right home. When the ex-Sergeant arrived Shayne saw that he was a tall, heavy-set, honest-looking man.

Shayne introduced himself and explained the reason for his visit.

"Anything I can do to help," Olney said. "Marty Maltz was a good guy."

"What was Maltz doing at Finch's house?" Shayne said.

"I wouldn't know, Shayne," Olney said. "Like I told the cops, Marty and I wrote to each other once in a while—but I hadn't seen him for a year or so: Maybe it was something Corelli told him."

"Corelli? He went to see Maltz?"

"Sure. He came to see both of us," Olney said.

"Why didn't you tell the police that?"

"They didn't ask me," Olney said. "Frankly, Shayne, I didn't want to get mixed up in a murder. Now that Marty's dead, maybe I was wrong."

"Maybe you were," Shayne said. Or maybe Olney had a better reason for hiding the fact that Corelli had visited him. "Tell me about Corelli's visit."

The tall ex-Sergeant shrugged. "It was a hell of a shock at first. We all thought he was dead. There

was quite a stink right after the war. They accused one of us, or all three of us, of betraying Corelli and getting him killed."

"Did you?"

Olney looked straight at Mike Shayne. "I didn't. I don't know about the other two."

"How did Corelli survive?"

"He said that the Krauts that captured him were in a big hurry and turned him over to the regular Army instead of the Gestapo. The Krauts who had him didn't know who he was, so they sent him to a labor camp in Germany instead of shooting him. He was lucky."

"Where had he been for nineteen years?" Shayne asked.

Olney shook his head. "He didn't say. He just wanted to know where Finch was, and what had happened to the money. He accused me of turning him over to the Krauts. I told him he was crazy. He said maybe, but he'd watch me. I told him to watch."

"He mentioned money?"

"Yeh. There was rumor about a lot of money after the war. I never really believed it. We'd have known."

"You didn't know? None of you?"

"Not as far as I know," Olney said. "But I was just the radio man."

"What else did Corelli say?" Shayne asked.

Olney seemed puzzled. "Well, he asked about Steiner. That was



funny. I didn't know Corelli even knew about Steiner."

"Who was Steiner?"

"That's a good question," Olney said. "No one knew for sure. It was top secret hush-hush Gestapo stuff. I used to monitor calls from the high brass about Steiner. There was talk Steiner could have been a double agent. All we knew was that Steiner was the name of a Gestapo trouble-shooter who operated near the front all the time."

"There were all sorts of rumors who he could be, some even thought Steiner was more than one man. We'd get reports about him being on both sides of the line. One thing I know. He was a killer and the Kraut officers were scared as hell of him."

"What did Corelli want to know about Steiner?"

"That was funny, too. He wanted to know if I knew where Steiner was. I told him I wouldn't even know what Steiner looked like. I'd

barely heard of him. Corelli said, of course, he had just heard of Steiner, too. He told me to forget he even asked."

"What about that betrayal in Italy?"

"What about it?" Olney said.

"Did any of you betray Corelli?" Shayne said.

"No," Olney said. Shayne had the definite feeling that the ex-Sergeant was lying. Olney went on. "However, it would have been justified. We'd have died if he hadn't got caught. That crazy Italian had planned a raid that was just about a suicide job. Finch tried to argue him out of it, but Corelli insisted."

"Corelli was captured before that raid?"

"Two days before," Olney said. "We were pretty damned glad, I can tell you."

"What else do you know about Steiner?"

"Well, Corelli said—"

That was as far as Olney got. The shot was sudden and low. A silenced gun. Olney did not fall. He straightened up instead, stared, and slid to the floor. There was a neat hole in the side of his head. It was bleeding. When Shayne bent over the man, Olney was dead.

Shayne ran for the door. He reached the sidewalk and had a glimpse of a thin man sprinting around the near corner. Shayne ran after him. When he reached the corner a small grey coupe was

already pulling away. Shayne went back to the house. He got the New York license plate, but he did not think that would do much good.

In the house Olney's wife was bending over the dead man. She blinked her eyes and stared at Shayne.

"I'm sorry," Shayne said.

The woman blinked again. "He went through the war."

The woman was clearly in shock. Shayne called the police and a doctor. He found the name of the doctor in the Olney address book. The police detained him when they arrived. He told them to call Captain Masters, and after Masters had identified him they got his story and let him go. He gave them the license plate number of the grey coupe. Then he left.

Shayne got into his car and lighted a cigarette. Maltz and Olney. Only Finch was left of the men Corelli had accused of betraying him. And Corelli was dead. Shayne could understand why Corelli would have wanted to kill Maltz and Olney and Finch.

But who would kill Corelli, and Maltz, and Olney? And why not Finch? Unless it was Finch himself because there was more to the betrayal in Italy than had come out, and Maltz and Olney had known about it.

Shayne put the car into gear and headed for the Parkway into New York. On the way he stopped

to call Masters. He asked the State Police Captain to check on the whereabouts of Finch and all of his guests that afternoon. He asked Masters to send a picture of Corelli to the New York Police right away.

Then he got back into the car and drove on toward New York. He wanted to find out how Corelli had come to the United States, and, if possible, where the Partisan leader had been for nineteen years. It might be a help.

VII

MICHAEL SHAYNE reached New York in the afternoon and went to the Italian Consulate. The Consul was helpful. He did not know anything about Corelli, but he cabled Rome immediately.

Shayne left to pick up the picture of Pietro Corelli at New York Police headquarters. Masters had sent it by messenger. With the picture in his hand, Shayne walked out into the shadows of the tall buildings.

He walked through the city for the rest of the day, into the night, and all morning of the next day. He took five hours sleep in the Algonquin Hotel. By noon of the second day Shayne had checked every steamship that had arrived in the last month, every airline between New York and Rome, every terminal and pier. He had talked to crews and sailors.



He learned absolutely nothing. No one had seen a man named Corelli, or one who looked like the picture of the dead man.

The Consul had received prompt service from Rome. Nothing. As far as the Italian authorities in Rome knew, Corelli had died in the war. There was no record of Corelli's reappearance.

Shayne left the city and drove back to Westhampton. He had called Lucy Hamilton to tell her he did not know when he would return to Miami. It looked like a long case. Lucy said she would send his mail. Shayne drove fast to Westhampton.

At State Police Headquarters, Masters was waiting. The Captain listened sourly as Shayne told him of his search for Corelli.

"We checked that out two days ago," Masters said. "All of it."

"Now you tell me," Shayne said.

"You didn't ask," Masters said, and grinned.

"And your Connecticut cops forgot to ask Olney about Corelli,"

Shayne said. He told Masters all he had learned from Olney.

"I think he knew more," Shayne said. "And I think the killer thought he did too. But what?"

Shayne told Masters about the death of Olney. "What about our suspects? Did any of them take a long drive yesterday?"

"All of them did," Masters said, frowning. "When we checked we found that Finch went into New York to talk to his lawyer. Helpman says he drove out to Montauk just for a drive. Macadam drove up to Port Jefferson to take a sail on his yacht; he sailed alone. Myrna Mix claims she went to New York to talk to her agent. He says she showed up okay, but four hours late and drunk. Sally Helpman drove up to Wildwood State Park and swam alone all day. None of them drove a grey coupe."

"Fine," Shayne said.

"We got a report from Bonn on Berger," Masters said. "Seems they were mighty interested. They've been watching Berger for years. Something about a little stealing back at the end of the war."

"Stealing what?" Shayne said.

"Some German war secrets. They wouldn't say what, because they have to clear it with Washington first. Otherwise, Berger's record seems above-board. He was a Hauptman in the Signal Corps in all the places he says. He got around so much because he had friends in high places."

"That's what he'd use as a cover if he was Gestapo," Shayne said. He told Masters about the mysterious Steiner. Masters was interested.

"I'll get after Bonn again," the State Police Captain said.

"What about Corelli?" Shayne said. "He seems to have moved around a lot also, completely unnoticed."

"All we know is a man who looked like him took a flight to Chicago about six days ago. I figure he visited Maltz."

"Anyone see him in Westhampton?"

"No one," Masters said.

"That sounds peculiar. It's a small town. He didn't just fly to Finch's lawn."

"It's mighty peculiar, all right," Masters agreed. "Suppose you tell me."

Shayne tugged at his earlobe. A small fact was going around in his mind. Corelli's clothes—Italian made and smelling of salt water. Shayne stood up.

"I've got an idea, see you later," he said.

Shayne drove from the station back across the small bridge to Westhampton Beach and Finch's house. The two men who had tried to kill him still did not fit. They had looked Italian. Shayne decided to set a trap, with himself as bait.

Stealthily Shayne left the house. Stealthily, but so that everyone in

the house—and they were all there now—would see him. He carried a shovel and a large metal box. He walked quickly to the high sand dunes above the sea.

The surf was calm and breaking lazily on the beach. Far out three boats, trawlers of good size, were fishing. Two of them were obviously Bunker Boats fishing for menhaden. The third was of a type Shayne did not recognize.

Smiling grimly to himself, Shayne picked a spot that was hidden from the house but was in partial view from the sea. He began to dig. He dug for a half an hour, slowly. Then he buried the metal box and returned to the house. He made sure anyone could see that he no longer had the tin box.

In the house Shayne played casino with Alistair Finch until just before dark. He had seated himself so that he could watch the spot where he had buried the metal box. He was sure nothing would happen until dark, but he sat at the window just to be sure. Nothing happened. Finch went to dress for dinner. The others were all in their rooms.

Shayne went to his room, got his pistol, put it into his pocket, and left the big house. He crouched low behind the dunes and hurried to where he had buried the box. Behind a dune, from where he could observe both the spot where he had buried the box, and the sea

and beach, Shayne lay down and held his pistol in his hand.

Far out Shayne could see the important something he had been counting on. The moon was just rising, and the detective could make out the vague shadow of a distant boat. One boat now. It was very late for a fishing boat to be at work.

VIII

THEY SEEMED TO rise up like ancient monsters from the sea. Shayne had been staring at the empty ocean, the lazily breaking waves, and then they rose from nowhere. They came straight out of the sea.

There were two of them. In the pale moonlight they were indistinct. They could have been real monsters. But actually they were two men with heavy air-tanks on their backs, rubber suits, fins on their feet, and what looked like spear guns in their hands.

Shayne held his breath and waited. The two men took off their fins, looked carefully around, and started up the beach toward where Shayne had buried the metal box. Both of them had flipped down their rubber head hoods. They walked steadily but carefully to the dunes and stood just above where Shayne had buried the box.

One of the men was carrying a canvas-wrapped case. He put it down and opened it. He took a



shovel from the case and began to dig. The other man said something to him. The first man grunted in answer. They were speaking Italian.

Shayne stood up and leveled his pistol. "Sorry gents, the money's not there," he said.

The two men leaped back as if shot. One of them—he was small, and thin, and wore a dark mustache—reached for a pocket that bulged in his rubber suit.

"Hold it!" Shayne snapped.

The small thin man stopped moving. Shayne walked down with his pistol covering both men.

"I thought you'd be watching me," he said, grinning. "Did my digging interest you?"

The thin man with the mustache swore in Italian. The other, who was short and chunky, said nothing.

"Try English," Shayne said. "You Partisans speak English, I'm sure."

The thin one shrugged. "Of course we speak English."

"Bet you were surprised to see me alive," Shayne said. "Such careless work. I hope you did better in the war."

"We were in a hurry," the chunky man said. "I told you to kill him before you threw him into the water, Marcello."

"Shut your mouth!" Marcello said.

Shayne smiled. "Attempted murder is a bad charge in this country. You want to tell me about it?"

Marcello hesitated. Then the Italian shrugged an eloquent Latin shrug.

"We made a mistake. The car, you understand? It was his car, that Major Finch. We thought you were him."

"Try again," Shayne said.

"It is true," Marcello said. "We think you are Major Finch, the swine, and then when we hit you

and see you are not, we think you are in it with him anyway."

"You think he killed Corelli?" Shayne asked.

"Who else?" Marcello said. "Twice the swine kill Pietro!"

Shayne waved his pistol. "Okay, now sit down and tell me the whole story. All of it."

The two Italians looked at each other. They both shrugged and sat down. Shayne sat on the sand facing them. Sitting down they were all out of sight from the house and the beach. But Shayne kept his ears cocked for any sound while the thin Italian with the mustache talked.

"That Major Finch he betrayed Corelli," Marcello said. "The money it disappear, you know? We tell the Americans about it, but they say there is no proof. What can we do? We are poor Italians, and Major Finch is important man. So we try to forget. For nineteen years we try. And that is a very long time.

"Then, one day maybe two, three months ago, Corelli he come back. He was lucky. The Germans who captured him turned him over to regular German Army unit. Those Germans do not know he is great Partisan leader. They put him with many other poor Italians and send him to labor camp in the east of Germany. At end of war Russians liberate him. Corelli identifies himself. They do not treat him well until they check and find

he is Pietro Corelli, a great Communist Partisan.

"When they find out who he is, they send him to Russia. He stay there nineteen years. All the time he is asking about Major Finch, Captain Maltz, and that Sergeant Olney. He is sure that one of them betrayed him. He waits. He thinks about all the money. At last he decides to leave Russia. Corelli says Russia is not so good now. They don't like him any more in Russia because he was a Stalin man.

"He gets away and he comes home. He finds three of us from the Partisan unit. He has plenty money, but he tells us this one who betrayed him must have *all* the money. If it is Major Finch we get even more because he is so rich now. Corelli he says he will give us our share.

"So he buys a boat, good fishing boat, and we come over here. Corelli is afraid Italians will put him in jail as traitor or foreign Communist if he tells who he is before he gets the money. With the money he can prove he was betrayed, and, besides, money will buy anything.

"We sail over here. Corelli goes to see Captain Maltz and Sergeant Olney. Then he goes there to the big house to talk to Major Finch. Then he is killed. We try to kill Major Finch and it was you. A mistake. It must be Major Finch. Corelli he must have found out and the Major killed him.

"The other two, they did not kill him. That is how we know it is the Major."

"Then why did you kill Maltz and try to kill Olney?" Shayne said.

"Olney? No. It is true we try to kill the Major, because we were angry. But when we see we have not killed the Major, we think. Why kill him, let us get the money first. We see you bury something. We think it is the money."

Shayne studied the two men. The thin one with the mustache seemed nervous, but Shayne felt he was telling the truth. The chunky one had not spoken. They did not seem like the kind who would kill without an excellent reason, such as revenge or cash. Still, revenge could be the motive, a *vendetta* for Corelli.

"You two can go away for a long time," Shayne said to the Italians. "Now, maybe I'll forget about the attempt on me, and about the illegal entry into the United States. I said maybe. If you boys come clean all the way."

Marcello, the spokesman, shrugged. "What you want to know?"

"You said Corelli didn't know for sure which of the three Americans betrayed him," Shayne said. "What made him think he was betrayed at all, and why only those three?"

Marcello nodded. "All right, I tell you. We were a unit, yes?

These Americans they are with us. They have much money for us. This Major Finch he is in charge. One day Corelli he come to us he say the Major wants us to attack a German barrack. Twelve of us. We are to attack a whole barrack, and kill all the Germans.

"Corelli he says the American Major is crazy. The job is a suicide, no? We do not like it. Corelli says we cannot say no, because the American Major says if we don't attack we don't get money. We got to have money to pay for food, to help our wives, to help the poor.

"Corelli says the job is so bad he thinks maybe the American Major is trying to get him killed or captured. He says if anything strange happens to him when we attack the barrack we should tell everyone what we know about the American Major.

"Two days before we are supposed to attack we are all scared. I never see us so scared. Then, two days before, Corelli he is out on a routine job. He visit the village for wine. Corelli goes. I go. We are on the way back. Corelli is behind. Then we see the Major Finch and Captain Maltz and the Sergeant Olney.

"They are across the valley, maybe two hundred yards away. They wave. Corelli he goes to see. He gets maybe one hundred yards and the Germans are waiting; I run. I get away. Later the Major, the

Captain, and the Sergeant come back. Corelli was captured they tell us. Two days later we all hear. Corelli is dead, shot.

"I tell Americans one of those three men, maybe all three, betray Corelli, set trap. Nineteen years we wait. Corelli comes back, and how he is dead again."

Shayne could see the whole picture. An isolated unit behind enemy lines. Italians and Americans in uneasy alliance. The fear and need of the moment. And someone had ordered a suicide mission? Why?

Olney had said the mission was a suicide job. Finch had said the same. Now the three Italians. *Only their stories did not agree.* Finch and Olney said the attack on the barrack had been Corelli's idea. The Italians said it was an American idea. Someone was lying.

"Tell me about Steiner?" Shayne said.

The thin Italian said, "Steiner? Who is he?"

"You never heard of Steiner?"

The thin man shrugged. "No, I never hear."

The chunky Italian said, "I no hear."

Shayne pulled his earlobe thoughtfully. They both seemed to be telling the truth.

Shayne heard a faint noise behind him. He whirled, and climbed swiftly to the top of the dune. A hundred yards away in the dark he



thought he saw the shadow of a man moving. Then the shadow was gone. It had looked very much like the same man who had killed Olney. Just below where he stood on the dune, Shayne saw depressions in the sand.

Someone had been listening. Someone who had crawled up in total silence. Shayne motioned to the Italians to walk ahead of him. He marched the Italians to the house. He left them in the hall and called Masters. While he was waiting for Masters, Finch came into the hall.

"Marcello! Candio," Finch cried. "What the hell . . ."

"The two men you didn't know who jumped me," Shayne said.

The thin Italian, Marcello, shouted, "Betray! Traitor!"

The chunky Italian spat on the thick carpet of the hall. Finch sat down hard in a chair.

"Get them out of here!" Finch said.

"In a minute," Shayne said.
"They bother you?"

"Get them away from me, Mike!" Finch shouted. "You hear me?"

Finch was almost hysterical. Shayne watched the industrialist. The man was far too affected by men who had simply accused him of something he said he hadn't done. Finch appeared to be on the verge of attacking the two men.

"Take it easy, Ally," Shayne said.

"You're fired, Mike!" Finch cried. "Do you understand? I hired you, and I can fire you. I don't want you around, I—" The man was raving hysterically now.

Shayne reached out and slapped Finch. Finch stopped and stared. Then the industrialist began to cry. Finch was still crying in the hallway when Masters arrived. The State Police Captain looked at Finch.

"Two guests for your calaboose," Shayne said.

"What charge?" Masters wanted to know.

Shayne looked at the two men. "Illegal entry," he said. "I want them around a few days, okay?"

Masters nodded. "I can hold them a few days, I suppose. No other charge?"

"Not right now," Shayne said.

The thin Italian, Marcello, nodded to Shayne. There was a cer-

tain gratitude in the eyes of the Italian. The charge could have been much worse.

Masters took the two men away. Finch had vanished somewhere. Shayne rubbed his big jaw for a moment. It was beginning to make some sense, but he had two more things to find out.

IX

AFTER THE TWO Italians had gone, the rest of the night was uneventful. Finch did not appear again. Macadam got quietly drunk by himself on the enormous terrace. The Italian trouble seemed to have disturbed Macadam, and Shayne kept his eye on the yachtsman.

Myrna Mix got noisily drunk, as usual. Helpman took a long walk alone. Berger and Laura Finch went off together for a drive. Sally Helpman did not leave the house. She sat and watched television all night.

Shayne went to his room, and with a tall drink in his hand sat in the oversized armchair cogitating on his analysis of the case. The case boiled down to two questions: Had Finch betrayed Corelli and then killed him when he showed up again? If Finch had not killed Corelli, who else knew Corelli? They all could have known Corelli.

One thing was certain. Whoever had killed Corelli had thought that

Corelli was dead. Therefore it had to be someone who had known Corelli in Italy, and had also known Corelli had been captured and, presumably, shot.

The next morning, Shayne puzzled over this all the way into New York along the sunny Southern State Parkway. He did not strike bad traffic until he reached Cross Island Parkway and turned north. He went into Manhattan through the Queens-Midtown Tunnel. He drove straight to Finch's lawyer.

Alistair Finch's lawyer was an old man. His name was Whitestone Gibbs, and he had been the lawyer for the Finch family for fifty years. The old man was brusque.

"All right, Shayne, I've heard about you. I don't like petty legal peeping toms."

"And I don't like shysters," Shayne said. The redhead eased his big frame into a deep leather chair in Gibbs' fine office. Shayne smiled. "But then, you're no more a shyster than I am a peeping tom, are you? Why trade insults for no reason at all?"

Gibbs glared. Then the white-haired old man laughed.

"All right, Shayne. We'll play it clean." The old man sat down. "What dirt do you want to know about my client?"

"Does he have any dirt to find?"

"Who doesn't," Gibbs said evenly. "I advised him against hiring

you, you know, when he asked my advice."

"He's smarter than I thought," Shayne said.

"I'll flatter any man who flatters me," Gibbs said. "What is it, his women? Alistair has three passions, Shayne, but murder isn't one of them. He is not a violent man despite his war record. As a matter of fact, I imagine he got more medals for less killing of the enemy than any man in history. His forte was clean, safe work. He has courage."

"What are his passions?" Shayne said.

"Blonde woman too young for him, plenty of money and his social position that money helps him keep, and the reputation for being a patriotic industrial genius," Gibbs said.

"You've given him three good reasons for killing Corelli," Shayne said. "That is, if he betrayed Pietro Corelli. I am presuming Finch told you the whole story!"

"Most of it," the lawyer said. "And what I told you about Finch would also do for his partner, Kurt Berger, just as well. Berger likes money, he likes position, he likes being the industrial tycoon, and he likes young and blonde women. In fact, he likes the same young blonde woman, I'm very much afraid."

"But he didn't know, or betray, Corelli," Shayne said. "If Finch betrayed Corelli over there in Italy,

he could be made to smell very bad."

Gibbs agreed. "I doubt if they could touch him, but the Government would put a lot of pressure to get him out of his own company. That I will concede. A traitor makes a bad patriotic industrialist."

"What about the money? If Finch took the money, Italy and the United States might wonder about his whole operation."

Gibbs looked at a point above Shayne's head. "You know, Shayne, I've always wondered how Kurt Berger got so high in Alistair's company so quickly. Berger's a sly one. There he was, a supposedly unimportant Captain in a defeated army, tainted with Nazi-ism, and within two years after the war he owned half of a giant international company."

"Money?" Shayne said.

"Where would Berger get money? On the other hand, how did Berger happen to contact Alistair and go so far so quickly?"

"You're suggesting that Berger somehow got the Partisan money, found out about Finch at the same time, and looked him up? Is that it?"

"It is a bit of a coincidence that Berger was a Nazi officer, and Alistair operated within the German lines," Gibbs said. He looked at Shayne. "I suppose you've found out that Bonn is interested in Berger's career?"

"You don't miss much," Shayne said.

"No, not much," Gibbs said. "I believe that Berger stole something from someone back in those days."

"And you know if Finch needed money before the war," Shayne said.

The white-haired old man frowned. His lined and weather-beaten face became severe. Shayne watched the old man struggling with himself over something.

"Did he need money?" Shayne said.

Gibbs stared straight ahead. "I've been the Finch lawyer a long time, Shayne. I can't answer that."

"You mean you won't? I think the police could find out very quickly," Shayne said.

"I suppose they could," Gibbs said. "Let me say this much, Shayne. Old man Finch, Alistair's father, was not a good businessman. He was a financial wizard, but he was careless about money. It seems a contradiction, but it isn't. The old man loved finance, the manipulation of money and goods. But he did not care about personal money."

"When Alistair came out of the Army," Shayne said, "how much money did he have? No, I'll phrase that question differently. How much money should he have had?"

Gibbs shook his head. "I can't tell you, Shayne. If the police want to know, they can go to

court." He turned to look at Shayne. "But I will tell you that two years before the war the Finch company was in bad shape. Then, when he went into the Army, Alistair put all his money into war bonds. At least he said he did."

"Did anyone ever see the actual bonds?" Shayne said.

"No," Gibbs said. "They were in a safety deposit box; he had the key with him."

"Thank you," Shayne said.

Gibbs watched Shayne stand up to leave. "Alistair is not a killer, Shayne."

"No killer ever is," Shayne said grimly.

X

SHAYNE DROVE fast out of the city toward the east. The sun was at his back all the way. It had still not set by the time he reached the State Police barracks. Masters was in his office.

"No trace of the guy who tried to kill Olney," Masters said. "Your two Italians are safe and cooling off. Bonn says that Kurt Berger could have been in Italy at the time. Records are bad from Nazi days. But he had a personal friend on Kesselring's staff. He was at Peenemunde for a time, something he never mentioned."

"That's the rocket development station?" Shayne said.

"It was," Masters said.

"What about the elusive Steiner?"

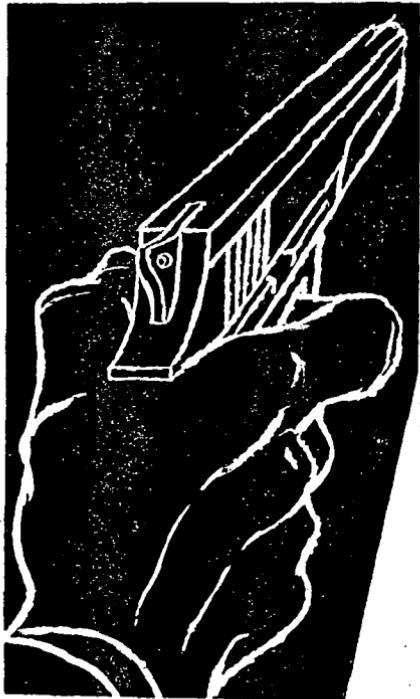
Masters shook his head. "Nothing. Or just about nothing. Steiner was a real secret Gestapo agent. Worked all sides of the line. Absolutely no record seems to have ever been kept. No picture, no description, no file at all. The Bonn people aren't even sure Steiner was one man."

"They do have three facts we could use. Steiner was working in Italy at about the right time. They don't know the job, or where, or how, or if anything happened. No report. The only reason they know Steiner was in Italy is that in one of Kesselring's intelligence reports the name is mentioned in connection with an accidental bombing on a hospital."

"Steiner was known to specialize in Partisan work. Whatever or whoever Steiner was, he was an expert in busting up Partisans. The other things are that Steiner was reported to have broken an arm badly, and that Steiner once got inside Auschwitz to ferret out a hiding Jewish scientist. That means that Steiner probably has a number tattooed on his arm."

"Or has a scar where it was removed," Shayne said.

The big detective sat and thought. He pulled on his earlobe and narrowed his steely grey eyes. A theory was taking shape. The key was the deaths of Maltz and Olney. They were the only two



men Corelli had actually talked to in America, if Finch was telling the truth. Shayne decided it was time to get the truth from Finch.

"Thanks, Masters, I may have something for you in a few hours. Come to the Finch house about nine o'clock. Okay?"

"I can use something, I'll be there," Masters said.

Shayne drove back to the big house on the beach. The road was deserted. But as Shayne approached the house he had a definite impression that someone

was watching him from an upstairs window.

He parked the car and walked in. He went up to change for dinner. Dinner was strained and quiet. They all seemed to be watching him except Kurt Berger who spent his time watching Laura Finch. Berger seemed to have nerves of iron. A trained spy would have nerves like that, Shayne mused.

After dinner Shayne followed them all into the living room. It was ten minutes to nine. Shayne lighted a cigarette and stood in front of Alistair Finch.

"All right, Ally, now really tell me about Corelli," Shayne said.

Finch seemed to flinch away as if he had been expecting to be asked that. Quite obviously he had no intention of answering.

"Go to hell, Mike," Finch said. "I should have known better than to hire you."

"You made a mistake, all right, if you wanted everything to stay top secret," Shayne said. "I've got a hunch at least two other people in this room know besides me and you. Anyway, there are three murders to worry about now, and they all had one thing in common. The killer knew about you and Corelli."

Finch snapped, "I'm completely innocent, Shayne. Just remember that."

"Tell me the story," Shayne said. He looked at his watch. As

he did so, he noticed Sally Helpman had come into the room. Shayne had not seen her go out. The tall, bony woman sat in a chair near her husband and smiled at Shayne. Masters would arrive in six minutes.

"Tell it yourself," Finch said. Shayne nodded. "Okay, I will. I figure it goes something like this. You and Maltz and Olney and your other three men were in with Corelli's Partisans. Everything was smooth until one day Corelli told you he'd planned a mission you knew was sheer suicide.

"Maybe you weren't sure if Corelli was just nuts or a traitor, but you knew it would be curtains for everyone. So you had to stop Corelli. You're not a killer, Ally, and I don't think Maltz or Olney were. Anyway, you like being the nice hero too much to risk all the trouble involved if you held a kangaroo court and executed Corelli.

"You couldn't even prove your suspicions, and you couldn't trust the other Partisans to believe you. So it was go through with a job you knew was a bad one, or get rid of Corelli. You tipped the Germans somehow and set up the ambush of Corelli.

"You figured they'd kill him, and you'd be safe. Or they'd show their hand and a deal by letting him live. You didn't figure on Marcello seeing you, but you had to go through with it. So in reality, you betrayed Corelli to save your

unit and the Partisans. You were a hero, Ally."

For a long time, a full minute, Finch said nothing. No one moved in the room. Berger was looking at Laura Finch who was looking at her husband.

Finally Finch sighed. "How did you figure it, Mike?"

"It had to be," Shayne said. "Maltz and Olney had to know about it, and they never talked. They must have approved. Both you and Olney said Corelli thought up the suicide job. Besides, I believed that you both thought Corelli was dead. And you're just not a killer, Ally."

"Thanks, Mike, but—" Finch began.

Shayne nodded. "But you couldn't resist the money. I believe you when you say you didn't know about the money when Corelli got caught. That was another thing that tipped me that Corelli was the liar, not you. Corelli had that money. Only he didn't have it when he was caught. You found it later and you couldn't resist. You've felt like a traitor ever since."

Shayne fell silent, waiting.

"I found it later," Finch said dully, his eyes on the floor. "I was going through Corelli's papers and I found this note. It said the money would be under a certain tree. I dug it up. After that I couldn't look anyone in the face, but I had to have that money! I was broke,

the company was going under as soon as I got home and—"

Shayne said, "What else was on that note?"

"A name," Finch said. Finch looked at Shayne. "Just a name. *Steiner.*"

XI

ALSTAIR FINCH shrugged. "Then I knew Corelli was a traitor. I had heard of Steiner. I wish to God I hadn't taken that money. I had to get rid of Corelli, but I didn't have to take the money. I can pay it back now. I've done good work, but I'll never live it down. I hoped, when I called you, I could keep it quiet. I should have known better, Mike."

Shayne looked at his watch. Masters would arrive any minute. Shayne turned to face Kurt Berger.

"How did you find out about Finch and Corelli," Shayne said to Berger. "That was your hold on Finch, wasn't it?"

Berger smiled a cool smile. "I had a connection on Kesselring's staff. I found out a little about Finch and Corelli. It was in a report that an American had betrayed Corelli. Corelli was supposed to have been shot, but there was an error. I destroyed the record after I photographed it. I needed an industrial connection in America."

"Kurt had a good deal," Finch

said. "But I might have turned him down except that he knew about Corelli."

"Berger had the formula for the rocket additive," Shayne said.

"Of course," Berger admitted. "Just the basic formula. Finch modified it. I did not exactly steal it. I copied it. Bonn merely wants to know how I had access to it. That is my secret."

"Steiner would have had access," Shayne said. "Steiner got around. The way I see it, Corelli made a deal with Steiner—half the money each and safe conduct for Corelli. Steiner wanted safety by then. He was supposed to be smart, and the end was in sight for Germany."

"I figure Corelli contacted Steiner and made a deal to lead his unit into a trap at that barrack. Then Steiner would save Corelli and they'd disappear with the money. Steiner knew no one could identify him, except Corelli. He probably planned to get rid of Corelli."

"But Finch loused it all up by betraying Corelli two days earlier. Corelli went to Russia and probably figured one American was in it with Steiner for the money. So he came looking for Finch and Maltz and Olney. Only Corelli ran into Steiner right here. Steiner killed him. Then Steiner killed Olney and Maltz. The only motive that made sense was that Corelli recognized someone."

"Even if Finch or Maltz or Olney had betrayed Corelli and taken the money, killing him would only have made it worse. They would have known Corelli wouldn't come alone. The others would know about the betrayal, because they'd made the charge after the war. But if Corelli had made a deal, then Corelli would know what Steiner looked like.

"It had to be the answer. It explained why Corelli told his men that it was the Americans who cooked up the suicide attack. It was Corelli's idea to get rid of everyone and get away with the money. And only Steiner would have wanted to kill Corelli. I don't expect Steiner would live long if his own people ever found him."

Shayne looked at Berger. The blond German had gone pale under his smile.

"Let me see your arm, Berger," Shayne said. "It will either clear—or convict you."

In the room no one moved. They all stared at Kurt Berger. The blond German was still smiling, but the smile was only on his mouth now. Shayne looked at his watch. Masters was already ten minutes late! Shayne lowered his shoulder slightly and fingered his pistol in his pocket.

"My arm?" Berger said.

"Steiner had a number from Auschwitz," Shayne said. "I want to see both your arms. I want to see a number or a scar."

"Scar? Number?" Berger said. "I have no scar or—"

Max Helpman had half risen from his seat. His face was red with fury. Shayne swung toward Helpman.

"A scar, Shayne? Low, on the right wrist? Maybe a faint trace of what looked like writing or figures still—"

The shot rang out in the silence of the room with a sound like the explosion of a bomb. Helpman jerked stiff. The bald man stared at Shayne. Then Helpman fell on his face.

Finch and Berger started toward him. Shayne was not looking at Helpman at all. He was looking at Sally Helpman. The tall, slender woman stood with the small pistol smoking in her right hand.

"Don't bother," Sally Helpman said to Berger and Finch. "I don't miss. He's dead. I never liked him anyway, the American pig. All of you, back! Against that wall. Quick!"

Shayne made a faint motion with his arm.

"No, Shayne!" Sally Helpman said. "I'll kill you in a minute. You did very well on this. We could have used a man like you Is this what you wanted to see?"

The tall, slender woman held out her right wrist. She pulled back the sleeve. There was a scar about two inches long on the wrist. It was faintly discolored.

"I told them the Auschwitz job

was too risky for me. I was far too valuable to be marked in any way. I was the one Gestapo agent no one ever knew—not even Hitler! But they were fools. You guessed correctly, Shayne. I made the deal with Corelli. Finch ruined it and those idiots in Italy sent Corelli away before I could silence him.

"I met Helpman in the hospital where I was posing as an American nurse. It was my chance to run for cover. I had to take it. I knew we were beaten. I was safe until Corelli came here. I had to kill him. I killed them all."

Shayne said, "I almost admire you. You're a very clever woman. Why didn't you kill me and the Italians out there on the dunes? You were there, Mrs. Helpman. Why?"

"Colonel Steiner!" the deep voice of the woman snapped. "I was a full Colonel in the Gestapo!" Then the woman smiled a thin smile. "Female vanity, I apologize, Shayne. You and the Italians? I heard, they knew nothing about me. I do not kill for nothing.

"And if you are stalling for time, Shayne, don't bother. Masters will be at least another five minutes. You see, I raised the drawbridge. He will have to go the long way, by another bridge. Now, if you will all line up I will—"

A siren sounded in the distance. Masters was no fool. The woman listened. Then she shrugged.

"He made good time. You are

lucky. I have my time schedule."

The woman vanished through the open French doors. Shayne started after her in a split second. Finch ran for the windows. Finch was a step ahead of Shayne when the window blew up. Shayne was bowled over.

When he got to his feet the French doors were a shambles and Finch was stretched out flat on his back. Shayne bent over the industrialist. Finch was badly hurt but alive. Shayne dashed out the doors.

A motor started not far away. A boat motor. Shayne dashed toward the water. He had gone a hundred yards and was just coming up over the dunes when his feet were caught and he fell headlong. There was a sharp pain in his right calf.

Swearing, Shayne disentangled himself from the barbed wire. He reached the top of the dune just in time to see the faint shadow of a small boat fade into the night.

By the time Shayne returned to the house, Masters was there with his men. The Captain was very angry.

"Damned drawbridge was up!" Masters said. "The controls were locked and there was no operator in sight."

"She was very smart," Shayne said. "She fooled me. I expect you'll find the operator dead somewhere."

"She? She who?" Masters said.

Shayne explained it all to Masters. The ambulance came for Finch. Laura Finch went with her husband. Berger shrugged and smiled and crossed to the liquor cabinet for a drink.

Macadam had been drinking for ten minutes, and Myrna Mix was matching him glass for glass.

"The thing that made me sure it was Steiner was the killing of Maltz and Olney," Shayne explained. "You see, the only thing that Finch, Maltz and Olney had in common was that they all knew Corelli. And the only thing that Finch did not have in common with Olney and Maltz was that *he had not seen or talked with Corelli*. Corelli never got to Finch. If he had, Finch would be dead.

"Steiner, or whatever her real name is, was a real pro. She did not kill without a reason, without something to be gained. When the Italians and myself were sitting ducks she left us alone. That was another hint that started the wheels turning. We had been talking about Steiner, and the Italians knew nothing.

"So I guessed that Corelli had been killed because he knew who Steiner was. Maltz and Olney were killed simply because they had talked to Corelli and Steiner had no way of knowing what Corelli had told them. She was taking no chances.

"Steiner, or Mrs. Helpman, didn't even know Corelli was still



alive. It must have been quite a shock when she saw him. She had a good cover. No one would suspect an American nurse, a woman, the wife of an American ex-OSS man. But she knew that if we once even guessed, even suspected, we would check into her fake American background. We'd find there never was a Sally someone who was a nurse in Italy.

"She counted on no questions ever being asked, on the fact that everyone assumed that Steiner was a man or more than one man, and on her marriage to Helpman. That was one more good step of cover for her. I can see why she grabbed it in Italy. I'll bet a year's income that when you check back you'll

hit a dead end at that American Hospital in Italy in nineteen forty-four."

Masters still looked amazed.

"How did you figure it was her, though? I mean, you knew it was Steiner, but why her?"

Shayne laughed. "I didn't know it was her. I figured it had to be her, or Helpman, or Macadam. Finch was too involved in all of it to be Steiner, Laura was too young, and Berger had stolen that formula. Steiner would never have stolen so obvious a thing. I just used Berger to help smoke her out. I admit she caught me by surprise, and that drawbridge trick was good. She was thinking all the time.

"Of course, the scar did it. I should have guessed a woman like her, though. She is big enough, and has a deep enough voice, to pass as a man. That's what made her such a good agent. She had that get-away planned like a military operation. After all, she was a Colonel."

"She won't get far," Masters growled. "The Coast Guard's out now."

Shayne shook his head, "She's had it planned too long, Masters. They won't get her that easily."

By morning they had not found Sally Helpman, alias Colonel Steiner. Just after dawn the State Police found her boat less than a mile down the coast. There were helicopter tire marks near it. Mas-

ter's notified Washington, and Shayne caught the jet back to Miami.

SEVEN MONTHS later Shayne was in his office when Lucy Hamilton brought in the newspaper. There was a small item on a back page. It said that a woman known as Sally Helpman had been found dead in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It said she was a famous German agent known only as Steiner.

Two days later Shayne got a letter from Masters. It told him that the FBI had finally tracked the woman to Tulsa. She had been working as a clerk in a bank, disguised as a man. No one knew who she was, and everyone had liked her. When the FBI carefully closed in, they found her sitting alone in her room smiling at them. She had taken poison and died in ten minutes.

"They traced her back to that hospital and no farther," Shayne said to Lucy. "They never did find out her real name."

"No name at all," Lucy said. "She was a horrible woman, but at least she should have a name."

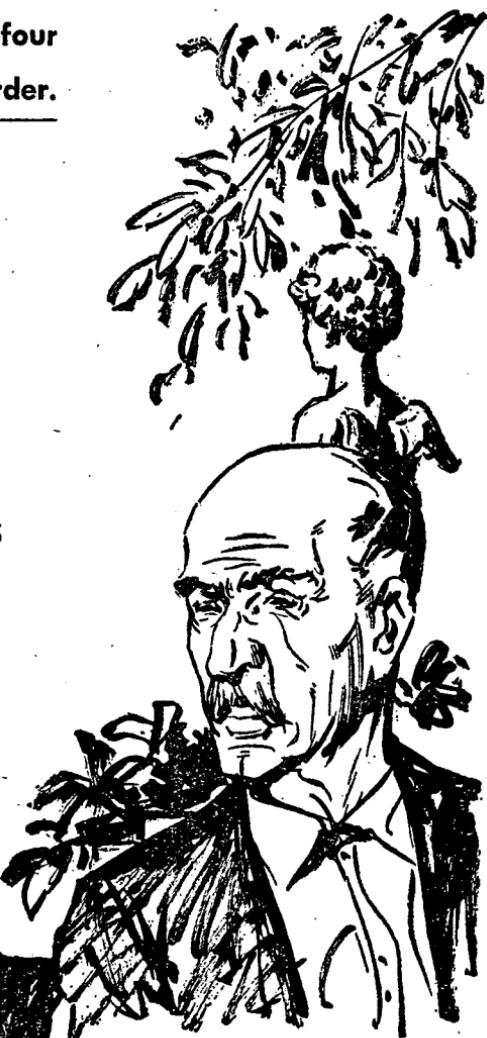
"Just Steiner," Shayne said. "Colonel Steiner. I think that's the way she would have wanted it. She thought of herself as a soldier, I suppose. But she was just a killer, Lucy—just a paid killer."

Shayne read the letter again and turned back to his quiet, routine cases.

**They met exactly fifty-four
years later to talk of murder.**

Love and Death

by ARTHUR PORGES



THE TWO MEN in the garden were very old, but only infants compared to the little bronze statue of Eros, with its greenish patina and soaring grace. It stood on a massive pedestal of marble, and smiled in a subtle,

secret way as if amused that men should so seldom take love lightly.

This great sweep of glowing flower-beds and precise green hedges had once been part of a private estate. It now belonged to the nation, a victim of changing times and death duties; of the noble family that once owned it, there were no survivors at all in England, and few elsewhere in the world.

The two old men, met here by chance, made a study in contrasting types. One was very tall and big-boned; in his youth he must have been a muscular giant. Now, his well-worn clothes flapped loosely on a fleshless body, and his long, sunken jaws, meticulously clean shaven, worked constantly as if he were trying to dislodge some particle caught between his brown teeth. His faded blue eyes were full of melancholy, and set deep in their sockets.

The other man was much smaller, and round in build. He was as ruddy as a winter-cured apple, and in spite of some slight stiffness of his joints, moved with the swift motion of a wild animal, his tiny, pale eyes darting here and there like those of a hungry predator in search of food. Yet he seemed as perky and cheerful as a robin. He was, in fact, a being of the open fields and nighted coverts: a born poacher in spirit, if no longer in practice.

The taller man was at first unaware of the other. He had been fingering, with great, gnarled paws,

the little Eros. Once, with a visible effort, he rocked it on the pedestal, and shook his head in wonder, jaws champing faster than ever.

The small man, who had been strolling in an apparently aimless way over the grounds, saw this with his quick little eyes, stood a moment, and then moved nearer. His feet made no noise on the soft turf, but then he would have glided as silently over dried leaves.

"Heavy, isn't he?" he said in a voice that was soft and furry.

The tall man, his senses never as keen, was taken by surprise, and turned hastily. Then he stepped back from the statue as if caught in some disgraceful act.

"That's so," he said, his own voice very high and rusty for so large a chest. There was a thin whistle in it, too, that made the ex-poacher give him a sharp glance. Lungs, the little man told himself. Fair gone, poor chap.

"Interesting thing, that there statue," he said. "Arr."

"Been here a long time," the big man said. "Before you were born, likely." He gasped, and coughed for several moments.

"I'm older'n I look," the other said proudly. "Eighty-seven last month."

The taller man gave a low whistle, that broke off-key as his breath failed. He coughed again, his whole body quivering.

"Then you've got three years on me," he panted. "And better lungs."

"Always slept outside since I was nine," the poacher said in a complacent voice. "That's what done it; makes 'em strong. No stuffy, frowsty houses for mine. Rain, snow, sleet—took 'em as they came."

"You must o' been in the open almost as long as this chap here," the other said, tapping the figure of Eros.

"Naah!" was the scornful reply. "Man, he was made before our granfathers saw daylight. Comes from Italy, he does. Eros, that's his name. Greek god of love, fact. Know anything about him?"

"Not as any Eyetalian god. But I know what you don't; that he was used to kill a young lord, he was. Long time ago; back in nineteen-ten. That was like another world."

The small man stiffened, and his restless eyes fixed a calculating gaze on the speaker.

"Now that's a queer story. A killing, you say—here in this garden. And over fifty years ago. Not many would remember a thing like that now, unless—"

"It's true, though, and I've good reason to remember the whole thing."

"Who was killed?"

"Young Lord Caton. He was a wild one."

"And who did it?"

"Ah!" The big man shrugged, his jaw champing. "Nobody was ever convicted."

"But there was a trial?"

"Yes." He rocked the statue on its pedestal again. "They tried to make a case against the parlour-maid. A pretty thing she was; Irish, with red hair and a temper to match. Young Caton was always after her, but she was a good girl, and promised to the coachman. No lords for her; not when he couldn't ever marry her, and didn't mean to.

"That morning all the family and the servants had gone off to the sea-shore for the day. Only the parlour-maid stayed behind; she was feeling poorly. And there was a game-keeper about, too, to watch the pheasants. There was a lot of poaching that season."

"Arr," the little man said, his voice full of understanding.

"When the family came back, late in the afternoon, Caton was lying dead right about here where we're standing, with his head caved in. This here statue was laying beside him, all bloody."

"It turned out he must have slipped away from the others right after they left, and came back to force his attentions on the parlour-maid. She couldn't deny that; not the way he was all scratched up; she fair tore his face to shreds, fighting. But she claimed she'd broken free, and escaped to the servants' quarters. Locked herself in, she said."

"The family would have it she killed young Caton with this statue, and insisted on a trial. But they found in court it weighed too much. See, I can't lift it myself. Sure, I'm

old now—but in my prime, it wouldn't o' been easy. No girl alive could've swung it hard enough to smash the boy's head that way. And she was just a bit of a thing, anyhow.

"Then there was talk of the gamekeeper, but he had witnesses to prove he was at the other end of the estate all day. The vicar was one of 'em.

"So the famiy and the police finally had to agree that some vagabond must've done it. Some crazy big giant. But young Caton's jewelry and wallet weren't touched. So you see it was a puzzling thing in the end." He coughed loudly, then jabbed the statue with a long finger. "If this here thing could talk, eh?"

"He don't have to talk to me," the little man said, with a sly grin. "I know just what he'd say."

The big man stared at him, chops working violently. Then he wheezed: "Do you, now?" His voice was full of skepticism. "And what would that be?"

"Let me re-con-struct the crime, like the police used to say. That parlourmaid was a clever piece, I'm thinking, and desperate. Young Caton caught her alone, and meant to have his way with her—that's how they said it then, remember: prissy-like. Nineteen-ten, remember. She clawed him good, but he was a big swine, and strong as a bull. Then she must've got hold of this statue. He wasn't ready for that, and she bashed him a good one."

"But it's too heavy. I just told you—"

"Arr," the other broke in impatiently. "It is now. But when she hit him, and he fell with his head broken, a piece popped out of the middle of the back—a sort of plug that nobody ever knew was there, even. She realized, once she could think straight at all, that the statue was really hollow; cast over a core. "She was a bright one, like I said, and in a bad hole. Sure, it was self-defence, but in England, in those days, killing a lord was trouble. Poor people didn't have no friends in court. And it would only be her word, with no witnesses.

"So she stands there, her dress torn, crying, and wondering what to do. And then it comes to her. If she can make this statue too heavy for a chit of a girl, they'll think some big man must've done Lord Caton in. He had enough enemies, what with his chasing every skirt in the county.

"But what to fill that hollow statue with—that was the problem. Water isn't heavy enough, and it gurgles. It had to be something that will keep everybody thinking the statue is solid, and always was. Nobody had fooled with the thing for générations, so there wouldn't be any suspicion.

"Well, she goes to the gamekeeper's hut to see what's available. He isn't there, naturally; off guarding his precious birds and their eggs, usually addled. She finds the perfect

filling; lead shot in sacks. They used pounds of the stuff, then; several hundred birds in a day's shooting often. All sizes, too. She's clever, all right, and uses the finest shot, so that it'll pack good and tight, and give the most weight.

"She leaves the statue alongside the body, and pours the tiny lead shot in through that opening in the back. She takes a couple of hours to do the job proper, hauling five-pound sacks of the stuff from the hut to the garden. She shakes it down good, and when the thing's too heavy to move, uses a rammer of some kind. Lead is soft, and can be worked down so it won't rattle.

"When the statue is full as she can make it, the girl cements the plug back in place, and smears the spot with dust and grease so that nobody would suspect it's there at all. When the bobbies come and pick up the thing, it takes two of 'em to lift it!"

Here he noticed that the big man was watching him with a wild stare, and said: "What's the matter?"

"How the devil did you know?" the other asked, jaws champing.

The poacher was studying him carefully in turn, and said grimly: "Oho! So you know, too. Don't deny that, old man. What's your part in this, hey?"

"Why, I married her. I was the coachman. She told me all about it."

"Blimey!" The little man was shaken. "Then you're Tom—Tom Higgins!"

"I am, indeed. I am! But you, sir?"

"I was the gamekeeper. Don't you remember Harry Marsh?"

"Harry Marsh, by God! It's been fifty years or more."

"Fifty-four years, man. Exactly fifty-four."

"But how did *you* know?" Higgins asked.

"I missed all that shot, and figured some of it out. She told me the rest when I questioned her."

"And you never talked."

The other smiled, a crooked

writhe of his lips.

"I loved her before you, Tom Higgins. She wouldn't have me; you were too tall and grand; but I never held that against her. She was a wonderful creature, little Mollie Patterson. I didn't want her in prison, or hanged."

"She's dead," the big man wheezed. "I lost Mollie last month. Ah, you're right, she was a rare un. I used to meet her right here, by the statue, when we were courting." His huge hand stroked the little smiling bronze head, and twilight came to the garden.

COMING SOON—ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

A MISHAP IN VENICE

*It seemed a pity to Paolo that romance in
Venice should be at the mercy of racketeers.
So he turned their spadework upside down.*

by JAMES HOLDING

WITHIN TWENTY hours after Vanucci's visit to their mooring, Paolo heard of the first mishap. As he made to rejoin the traffic in the Grand Canal after dropping a passenger at the landing stage below the Rialto Bridge, a gondolier named Benedetto called across the mooring poles to him from the shore.

"Paolo! Have you heard about Colossimo?"

With a sense of bad news impending Paolo answered: "No. What about him?"

"His gondola blew up."

"Impossible! There is nothing in a gondola to blow up."

"There was in Colossimo's," said Benedetto. "It blew up an hour ago with a big bang and sank in the Guidecca. Colossimo swam to San Giorgio and saved himself.

Fortunately he had no passengers at the time."

"Fortunate indeed. Can he salvage his boat?"

"They say not. A great hole was torn in the keel."

"A tragedy," said Paolo. "What caused the mishap?"

Puzzlement was plain on Benedetto's good-natured face. "A bomb," he said. "It is only a rumor. But they say a bomb."

Paolo said: "That's very strange. A bomb in a gondola." He frowned. "Well, goodby, Benedetto. I must get back to my mooring. I'll have some passengers for the early train."

Benedetto waved as Paolo leaned heavily on his oar and drove his gondola with long powerful strokes toward his mooring before the dining terrace of the

A CHILLING SUSPENSE NOVELET



Regina Hotel. He was troubled. He hoped Colossimo's mishap was merely that—a freak accident of some sort. But he was far from sure of it.

He moored his gondola between the poles before the Regina and skipped lightly ashore after covering the brasswork and seats of his boat with protective canvas. Mario and Umberto were both there. Under a small arbor, talking animatedly, they sat on empty, up-ended vegetable crates at a plank table. This was the canal-side headquarters of the goldoliérs who served the Regina and Europa mooring. The arbor was screened from the nearby hotels by the vines that grew upon it and afforded a modicum of privacy. Between jobs, the *gondolieri* Paolo, Mario and Umberto spent most of their time there.

Mario and Umberto stopped talking when they saw Paolo's face. Normally wreathed in smiles, reflecting Paolo's inner joy in his profession and his life, it now wore a sombre look. The crooked bridge of his nose where the swinging butt of his father's gondola oar accidentally caved in the bone during Paolo's apprenticeship years before, heightened his appearance of anxiety.

"What's wrong?" Mario asked bluntly, his big hands resting quietly on the table before him. Mario was a giant, over six feet tall, with enormous muscles, but as graceful

and dainty in a gondola as a ballet dancer.

"Perhaps nothing is wrong," Paolo said. "I hope so."

Umberto's wrinkled face, its creases depicting all the canals of Venice as his friends frequently told him, screwed itself up into a curiously charming smile.

"Perhaps there is nothing wrong?" he said to Paolo. "The statement of an optimist, *amico*. If something should be wrong, however, what would it be?"

Paolo told them about Colossimo and the bomb.

They exchanged glances. "That was the bang we heard over there then," said Mario to Umberto. He waved across the Grand Canal toward Santa Maria della Salute.

For a moment Umberto was silent. His rallying manner had vanished entirely. Then he said slowly: "You are thinking of the American, Vanucci?"

Paolo nodded. "I am."

"I also," said Umberto seriously. "It seems the only explanation for two mishaps to gondoliers in a single day."

"Two?"

"Yes. Gregorio Sesta, a gondolier who moors at San Marco. Do you know him?"

Paolo nodded. "What about him?"

"He was beaten and robbed last night on his way home. In Campodo Pozzi. Both his arms were broken."

Mario drew in his breath. His massive chest expanded like a bellows. "Dio!" he exclaimed. "I would like to catch the *sciacallo* that breaks a gondolier's arms! He robs him of his livelihood for months! His children will starve!"

Paolo asked Umberto: "Where did you hear this?"

"From Sesta's brother at San Marco."

"You did not mention it to us."

Umberto looked guilty. "I hoped, as you did about Colossmo, that it was merely a normal mishap. Not connected with Vanucci." He sighed gustily, a taint of wine and garlic and tobacco floating on the air from his breath. "I said nothing because I hoped it meant nothing."

Paolo said: "But now it means something, eh? Now we know the American, Vanucci, was speaking the truth about his protection."

IT WAS ON THE previous afternoon, just after Paolo had risen from his short siesta in the bottom of his gondola, that Vanucci appeared in their arbor. He had come walking very lightly for such a fat man down the narrow alley beside the Regina, stepping meticulously in his black and white shoes over the puddles left by the morning shower on the wet and glistening paving stones.

His eyes were childishly round and glacially cold. They were set far back in sockets of fat, and

they regarded Paolo, Umberto and Mario without expression.

"Is one of you called Paolo di Torcello?" he asked without preamble.

"I," said Paolo, watching the fat man curiously. "You wish what? A gondola ride, *signore*?" For the newcomer, despite his fluent Italian, was obviously an American tourist with those two-color shoes, the neat sports jacket and the button-down shirt collar.

"No," the fat man said. He smiled so that his sallow cheeks closed up around his eyes and almost hid them. "I don't want a gondola ride. I bring you a friendly word."

"My thanks," said Paolo cautiously. "On what?"

"On the matter of the *confraternita* of gondoliers, of which I am told you are the secretary. Are you the secretary of the brotherhood?"

Mario spoke up. "Of course he is. Everybody in Venice knows Paolo is secretary of our society. What word do you bring him? And who are you?"

The fat man switched his gaze to Mario momentarily, eyeing the gondolier's bulging muscles with amusement. Then, imperturbably, he turned back to Paolo. "I am Pietro Vanucci," he introduced himself, "from Chicago, U.S.A. where I have been living for some years. But Venice is my birthplace, my own town. I return now to live here once again. I love Venice.

There is no place in America to equal it," he said sententiously.

"True," said Paolo, studying the American with a faint uneasiness. "But Signor Vanucci, what word do you bring me, if you please? What is your concern with the gondoliers of Venice?"

Vanucci answered obliquely. "You are in danger here, you gondoliers."

"Danger?"

"Yes. I come to warn you in a friendly fashion."

"Of what?" asked Umberto, speaking for the first time. "We gondoliers have lived and worked in Venice for centuries without any great hazards except starvation wages. What threatens us now?"

Vanucci didn't acknowledge his existence.

"Danger was the word I used," he said solemnly to Paolo. "And danger was the word I meant. *Pericolo*."

"What danger?" Paolo repeated. "I think you talk nonsense, if you forgive me, signore. What danger?"

The fat man smiled again. "It is an American kind of danger," he explained blandly. "Accidents that will happen, who knows why, to gondoliers and their gondolas here in our beautiful Venice. These accidents are promised your society by a group of men who, like me, have lived in America and learned some of the amusing American methods of making money."

Paolo was bewildered. His perplexity showed in the frown that wrinkled up the bridge of his crooked nose. "I do not understand you in the least," he said.

Vanucci said in a quiet voice: "Protection, you fool. Have you never heard of the excellent American custom of paying protection? So that your profession, your place of business, your health, your family shall be safe from harm?"

"No," said Paolo blankly.

Mario and Umberto shook their heads.

"You must have lived with your heads buried in your stinking canals," Vanucci remarked, "not to have heard of protection."

He did not speak like a man who loved Venice, Paolo thought, but like a gangster in an American film.

Mario stepped forward in anger. He flexed his thick fingers. But Paolo restrained him with a hand on his arm. "Wait," he said, "I wish to hear more of this American method of making money. You will explain, Signor Vanucci?"

"Certainly," said Vanucci. "It is very simple. Each member of your gondoliers' fraternity pays me a percentage of his earnings. In return, I shall see to it that nothing violent happens to the gondolier or his boat or his family. He pays me to protect him, you see? I have influence with the evil men who will otherwise cause unpleasant acci-

dents to happen. They will leave you in peace if I urge them to, and if each gondolier faithfully pays me for his protection. There. That is simple enough, eh?"

Shocked, Paolo looked at Mario and Umberto. "Do you hear this man, this American?"

"We hear," said Mario.

"Is he serious? I cannot judge. Or is it a monstrous joke he suggests?"

"It's no joke, *amico*." Vanucci's eyes glared coldly from their sockets of fat.

Umberto said indignantly: "You dare to propose such a thing? To the Gondoliers of Venice? To men who have received the oar in honor and pride from their fathers and father's fathers? I must tell you, Signor Vanucci, we need protection from no one! We are strong."

"Strong enough, at any rate, to throw you into the Grand Canal!" said Mario, reaching for the fat man.

Vanucci stood his ground. "Before you do," he said gently, "remember, I beg you, the many men—and they are many—whom I have brought with me from America to help me protect you. You don't know who they are. You don't know how expert they are in violence, injury and death."

Mario hesitated and looked to Paolo for a sign.

Paolo said, temporizing: "What do you want me to do?"

"Report my proposition to your



membership. Tell them it's just a small percentage of their earnings we want. The members of your union pay dues?"

"It's not a union," said Umberto with dignity. "It's a brotherhood. Of course we pay monthly dues."

Vanucci grinned. "So it's a brotherhood. You could pay for my protection by jacking up those monthly dues exactly five percent. The brothers can't object to that. Everything's going up these days. Even the price of safety. The brotherhood will give me that extra five percent each month in a lump sum. Sayes collection charges, see?"

He turned to Paolo. "You're the secretary of this union. That's why I came to you. You'll be contact. And make me my monthly protection payment. In cash." He drew on his cigarette. "And it had better

be right, my friend. I know how many members you have. I know what the current dues are. So I'll know it if you try any funny business. Understand?"

"Signor Vanucci, if the police of Venice hear of this—" Paolo began.

"Try it," interrupted Vanucci quickly. "Just try it. You go to the police and I'll know it within thirty minutes. And you'll be dead meat within twenty-four hours—all three of you. And anybody else who yells 'cops'." There was no mistaking his earnestness, or the deadly threat beneath the words.

Umberto shivered a little, his seamed face solemn. Mario stared hungrily at Vanucci, like a hog at an exposed truffle. Paolo sighed and looked at his friends. "I won't go to the police."

"But you will report my proposition to your society?"

Paolo shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

"When?"

"I can call the Council of Seven—our officers—together for tomorrow night perhaps."

"No perhaps about it. Do it." Vanucci lit a filter cigarette with a gold lighter. He didn't offer the pack to the gondoliers. "I'll come back here tomorrow afternoon to talk with you again."

"Why?"

"Because tomorrow you will believe I am serious about this. I realize that I can't expect you to take

my bare word for the danger that threatens your brotherhood."

"What more than your word can you give?" asked Paolo innocently.

"Some examples," said Vanucci, smiling, "of what can so easily happen to gondoliers in Venice who are without protection."

He turned and walked away down the alley toward Calle Larga 22 Marzo.

THAT WAS YESTERDAY. And now the fat man would come back again to force his 'protection' triumphantly down the throats of the gondoliers of Venice. Paolo, Mario and Umberto looked at each other without words.

They thought of Colossimo's gondola sunk in the Guidecca—the boat he had finished paying for only last week after twenty years of hard labor. They thought of Gregorio Sesta, the San Marco gondolier, lying in pain with both arms broken, helpless to earn his family's bread for months to come. And they thought of a menacing fat man named Pietro Vanucci from Chicago, U.S.A.

At length Mario spoke. "I will kill him," he said, "when he comes here this afternoon."

"No," Paolo said. "That would solve nothing. His unknown colleagues would carry on his scheme of blackmail."

Umberto said: "The brotherhood will never agree to pay this protection." He sounded as though

he were trying to convince himself.

"Perhaps not," Paolo said thoughtfully. "But I must report the matter to them, all the same. Suddenly our members are being maimed, their livelihood taken away from them. They have a right to know the reason." He gazed out over the silver waters of the Canal toward the beautiful tower of San Giorgio.

"Of course," Umberto agreed.

Abruptly, Paolo turned to Mario and said: "Mario, you know Gregorio Sesta's brother at San Marco mooring. Go at once and ask him about his injured brother and the attack made upon him last night. Find if his brother saw the attackers, how many there were, what they looked like, what they said if anything. Then find Colosimo, Mario. Discuss with him the explosion in his gondola. Ask him who his last passengers were before the explosion. Get a description of them. Find out where he picked them up, where he set them down. Understood?"

"*Va bene*," said Mario and pushed his gondola out into the stream.

"And me?" Umberto said.

"You take your gondola down and tie it up at the Accademia, Umberto. Then walk back here to the corner of the *Regina* alley. There you must await the appearance of Signor Vanucci. Stay out of sight. When he leaves here, after talking with me again, follow him.

Wherever he goes, follow him, watch him. No one in the city knows Venice as well as you. Do not let him escape your vigilance for a single second. Can you do that?"

"Easily," said Umberto, already discarding his gondolier's hat with its gay ribbon, and shucking out of the striped gondolier's shirt. "For how long shall I follow?"

"Until tonight. He will probably lead you back here when he comes to hear the decision of our Council meeting."

"Very good," said Umberto. He leaped aboard his moored gondola as lightly as a twenty-year-old. He stripped the canvas from the boat's brightwork and pushed off.

Paolo stood at the edge of their arbor on the landing stage and watched him until the old man's gondola disappeared around the bend of the Canal toward the Accademia Bridge.

A vaporetta went huffing by, black smoke trailing from its funnel. Paolo sighed deeply. He thought it was possible that he had just sent his two friends to their deaths.

AN HOUR LATER, when Paolo returned from ferrying three tourists and their luggage to the afternoon train, Pietro Vanucci was waiting for him in the arbor. The fat man sat calmly on Mario's sturdy crate at the plank table, smoking a cigarette. It stirred Paolo to fury to

see him so prosperous, idle, and self-assured. The arrogance of the man was almost past bearing.

Paolo himself had worked hard all his life. He had mastered his trade very early. He was respected by every gondolier in Venice for his skill, his honesty, his shrewdness. Had they not elected him secretary of their *confraternita*? Yet he barely managed to earn a living wage. And now this gross obscenity from Chicago, U.S.A., proposed to take from him and his fellow gondoliers a portion of even the little they had!

Paolo composed his features and hooded the glare in his eyes before he greeted Vanucci.

The American wasted no words. "I told you I'd be back today. Where were you?"

"I'm a gondolier, *signor*, after all," Paolo replied blandly. "I had passengers for the afternoon train. From the hotel here." He pointed his chin toward the *Regina*.

"And where are your friends?"

"They have passengers, too. It's the tourist season, remember?" He looked at Vanucci when he said 'tourist' and allowed a little contempt to come into his voice.

Vanucci was silent for a moment. Then he became the coldly jovial man of yesterday. "Has anything happened to any of your pals since I was here yesterday?" he asked with his buried-eye smile.

Paolo bit his lip. "Yes, *signor*. One gondolier has broken arms.

One has had his gondola destroyed. Is that what you mean?"

Vanucci nodded. He said: "Does that give you an idea of what your brotherhood is up against?"

"These mishaps were in truth your work?"

"Not mine. Get that straight. The work of those evil Americans I mentioned to you yesterday. The men you will pay me to protect you from."

"The violence was not necessary," Paolo said. "I would have presented your proposition to the *confraternita* without it."

Vanucci shrugged. "It is more convincing this way," he said. "You realize now that we mean business?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then you've got the message, *amico*. Deliver it to your Council of Seven. Does it meet tonight as you promised?"

"Yes."

"Good again. Several additional mishaps will occur today which will give emphasis to your words. I hope they will understand you. And realize that your brotherhood needs my protection."

"This is but the Council," Paolo said on a note of pleading. "It cannot make large decisions involving individual members. We can only consider your proposition and decide whether to submit it to the entire membership at a full-scale meeting. I beg you not to proceed

with any further violence until we have had a chance to reach our decision."

With a wave of his pudgy hand expressing impatience, Vanucci said: "Psychology is what counts in these matters, boatman. I understand psychology very well. And my proposition will have greater psychological impact on your Council if it is reinforced by numerous mishaps, as you call them."

Suddenly Vanucci grew angry. His face flushed and his round eyes receded into their pockets of fat. His tone became harshly peremptory. "You do what you're told, little man. And don't try to teach me my business." He turned away. "Bring me word of your Council's decision tonight."

"Here?"

"Where else?"

With the air of a man who has done his best but failed, Paolo said: "As you say, Signor Vanucci. Tonight."

Vanucci left, stepping delicately in his two-tone shoes.

PAOLO WAS EATING his frugal supper when Mario returned to the arbor. His jaws worked slowly on the bread and onion. Mario sat down at the plank table and reached a long arm for Paolo's *fiasco* of chianti. He took a deep draught, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Ai," Mario said heavily, "it is

hot work, this investigation. And depressing, too."

"What did you learn from Sesta?" Paolo asked, his mouth full.

"I learned from him where his brother Gregorio resides. Then I went myself to talk with the injured brother. I felt like a true *investigatore*, a detective."

"You are only a gondolier," Paolo said shortly. "What did you learn?" He was greatly relieved that Mario had returned unharmed. His relief expressed itself in irritable impatience with his friend.

"I learned very little," said Mario slowly. "Poor Gregorio has both arms strapped up in casts upon a framework. His is in great pain. But he told me what he could."

"Must I drag it from you, Mario, word by word?"

Mario gave Paolo an injured glance. "Gregorio left his gondola moored at San Marco last night as usual. He started to walk home. He lives near the Naval Hospital. To get there, he passes through Campo do Pozzi. In Campo do Pozzi, two enormous ruffians, with rubber masks of monkeys over their faces, seized him and beat him. One of the ruffians, who was slightly more enormous than the other, broke Gregorio's arms over his knee as you would crack twigs. It must have been pitiful."

Paolo had stopped chewing. He was silent. He took a drink of the bitter wine and swallowed audibly.

Then he said: "Rubber masks of monkeys?"

"So Gregorio described them."

"To prevent identification, clearly."

"No doubt," said Mario. "Although the Campo was deserted. It was past midnight."

"And is the word 'enormous' yours or Gregorio's?"

"Gregorio's. I asked him how big these enormous ruffians were. It occurred to me that in his excitement and pain, he may have imagined them bigger than they were. So I asked him: were they your size, Gregorio, these ruffians, or perhaps my size?" Mario regarded his own massive forearms with complacency.

"And he said?"

"In between. Bigger than Gregorio, smaller than me. Although the biggest of the *sciacalli* was almost my size."

"What else?" asked Paolo.

"The biggest one had part of his right ear missing at the lobe. Gregorio saw it under the mask when the big one held him. And the smaller one limped a little. Gregorio noticed it when they ran off and left him lying in the square."

"They said nothing?" Paolo inquired.

"Only one sentence," said Mario. "The smaller one. Just before they broke Gregorio's arms. He said: 'This wouldn't happen to you if you had protection, gondolier.' Then he laughed, Gregorio

remembers. Gregorio was very puzzled by the words."

Paolo mused aloud. "The masks alone would make them Americans, I believe. Do robbers in America not wear rubber masks?"

"In the cinema sometimes they do," Mario agreed. "But in real life, who knows?"

"They knew Gregorio was a gondolier, eh?"

"Certainly. Because the small one called him that, as I have reported. He spoke good Italian, too, but as though he were rusty in it."

"There is no possible doubt, Mario. These were Vanucci's men."

"So I believe, too, Paolo."

"Well. It was to be expected, I suppose." Paolo finished the last of his crusty bread and washed it down with chianti. "What did Colossimo have to tell about the explosion in his gondola?"

"His heart is broken. He loved his boat like a bride. He has been paying for it, little by little, for more than twenty years. Last week it is his, entirely his. Today—boom! It is gone in an instant, his life's work."

"That is not minor tragedy," Paolo said. "It is, in some ways, worse than breaking Gregorio's arms. Bones mend, but shattered dreams do not. Was it a bomb?"

"He thinks so. With a time fuse on it, clearly. He had just set down a passenger at Spirito Santo and was well out into the middle of the

Guidecca heading for the Danieli when the device exploded. It was left under his canopy, he believes, by that last passenger who carried a briefcase with him."

"What was it like, the explosion?"

"A sudden burst of flame, a loud noise, and a strong wind that knocked Colossimo right off his platform into the Guidecca. It was like a hand pushing against his chest, he says. He saw the water flooding in through the keel of his boat as he fell into the water. The whole bottom of the gondola was blown out."

"And does he remember the appearance of the passenger he set down at Spirito Santo?"

Mario nodded with satisfaction. "He does. Colossimo would like to meet him again very soon. He was tall and extremely thin, with a large Adam's apple that showed above his shirt collar. He had black eyebrows, very heavy, and a black mustache and pure white hair."

"Black eyebrows and mustache with white hair? The hair, perhaps, was a wig, or the eyebrows and mustache were false, hey? That doesn't help us much. Anything more?"

"Colossimo said the man, besides being very very thin, wore an old-fashioned watch fob hanging out of the watch pocket in his *calzoni*."

"That's better," Paolo said. "Did



this fellow say anything to Colossimo?"

"Only the usual things—in Italian."

"Did Colossimo describe him to the police?"

"Of course," said Mario. "Before he knew that this is the broth-erhood's business."

"And Gregorio?"

"The same."

"It doesn't matter," Paolo said. "The police will not connect the two mishaps, I daresay." He squinted approvingly at Mario. "You did well," he said. "No one appeared to follow you or take an interest in your visits to Gregorio or Colossimo?"

"No."

"That may be a good sign. But I worry about Umberto. He is old and timid. And he is following that *malvivente*, Vanucci."

"Even if they command a hundred men," said Mario with a grin, "these Americans could not

discover that Umberto is watching them. He is clever. Trust him."

They were silent, breathing quietly the damp, tender evening air of Venice that in the Spring seems to carry some of the haunting earth-fragrance of a mainland vineyard.

At length, as though by ignoring until now the question that was uppermost in his mind, Mario hoped to receive a happier answer, he asked: "Did Vanucci return?"

"He returned," Paolo said. "The Council meets tonight, I told him. But meanwhile, more gondoliers will be misused. Vanucci calls it psychology."

Mario growled deep in his throat. Then he went and got his paper-wrapped bundle of supper out of his gondola.

BY THE TIME of the meeting that night, the Council of Seven had heard reports of three more gondoliers injured, of two more blown up. The news of these mishaps flew as swiftly as swooping swallows along the canals of Venice. Gondoliers passed it from one to another in midstream. They gossiped about what it could mean at their moorings. They spoke of it in puzzled voices in every cafe and bordello they frequented.

The Council of Seven inevitably heard it, too. For each of the Seven was a gondolier himself. As a result, a sort of blind, uncertain panic was already running strongly

through the Council's ranks when Paolo made his report to them that night. And they almost welcomed his tale of Pietro Vanucci. For this, at least, made clear to them what had before been shrouded in mystery—the reason for the sudden series of unprovoked vicious attacks on members of their society.

"This Vanucci must have many men to do his bidding," one Council member hazarded with a worried frown, "to make seven attacks in less than twenty-four hours in such widely scattered sections of the city."

"It is the ultimate and unbeatable competition," said another tiredly. "We have fought the advent of motorboats and steam ferries in Venice with some success. But strong-arm men and explosives experts from America—these are too much for simple gondoliers. Although I take shame to say it. There is much that is shameful in all of this."

They explored the possibility of police action but decided against it for several reasons. One, because no man knew how many hoodlums Vanucci commanded in Venice who would carry on his blackmail or avenge his arrest if he were laid by the heels. Two, because the police were presumably working already on the cases of those gondoliers who had thus far become victims of Vanucci's 'psychology' and principally, be-

cause of Vanucci's grim threat of sudden death for informers.

"Do you believe Vanucci would kill for a five percent cut of our dues?" a Council member asked.

"I think he would," Paolo said. "He is an animal."

In the end, they merely confirmed Paolo as their official contact with the enemy. They authorized him to make what surreptitious investigations he could safely undertake to try to determine more facts about Vanucci and his organization.

They agreed to pass the word for an emergency meeting of the entire membership of the society for two nights later, the earliest possible date to assemble so many. And they told Paolo to promise Vanucci that the members would vote at that time on whether to pay, or not to pay, an extra five percent dues as 'protection' money to Vanucci and his hoodlums.

"And beg of him, Paolo," the Council president urged at the end, "to wait for the members' decision peaceably, to make no more attacks on our helpless members. Will you do that?"

"I will do it," Paolo promised. "But I cannot offer much hope that he will agree. He is, as I have told you, an animal."

They left it at that.

A FEW MINUTES later, Paolo reported the result of the Council meeting to Pietro Vanucci in the

arbor by the Regina Hotel. Gay voices could be heard on the hotel terrace, but the arbor was shadowed, dark. The hotel lights didn't reach this far.

Mario was sitting at the plank table, wordlessly smoking. Paolo had the feeling that very little conversation had passed between his friend and Vanucci while they waited for him.

Vanucci said to Paolo: "Well, boatman?"

Paolo told him. "Friday night a full membership meeting to vote on protection money for you. It is a formality only. The money is already yours, Signor Vanucci."

"Good," Vanucci said with satisfaction. "I'll want the first installment immediately after that meeting. In cash. What time will the meeting finish?"

"By midnight, perhaps."

"I'll be here at twelve to get the cash," Vanucci said. "See that you have it."

"Meanwhile," said Paolo, "the Council begs of you, no more violence, *per favore*."

Vanucci cursed contemptuously in English. He walked away without answering.

Mario arose from his crate and stretched his muscular arms. He spat on the stone flags at his feet. Bitterly he said: "That one I could strangle with great pleasure."

"Quiet," Paolo soothed him. "Umberto should be here soon."

They were silent then, listening

to the voices from the hotel terrace and to the oily lapping and sucking of Canal water against the mooring poles a few feet away. Ten minutes went by slowly, slowly. Then Umberto's shadow materialized from the dark mouth of the *Regina* alley. He came quietly forward and sat down at the table.

"Greetings," he said, beginning to load his caked old pipe with strong tobacco. "He is gone."

Paolo and Mario sat down. "You are sure?" Paolo asked.

"Sure, certainly. I saw him go. I went with him a short way."

"*Va bene*. We worried about you, *amico*. Following that filth."

Umberto grinned. "Worry about your grandmother," he said. "I am a Venetian. No American gangster can bring me harm."

"Enough," Mario growled and patted Umberto's arm. "Tell us of your mission."

"Yes, Umberto." Paolo was eager. "Tell us."

"When Vanucci left here this afternoon, I awaited him at the corner as you told me. I followed him very cleverly through the *Piazza San Marco*, past the Doges' Palace and down to the *vaporetta* landing. He did not see me. I was the invisible man, I can tell you.

"Vanucci got on a *vaporetta*. I boarded the same one, standing on the rear deck, out of his sight. He rode as far as the *Rialto*, where he disembarked and sat

down at a sidewalk cafe on *Riva del Carbon*, very near the east end of the bridge. You know it?"

"I know it," Paolo said. "What then?"

"There is a doorway with a red sign reading *Albergo Gozzi* above it that is just a few feet from that sidewalk cafe. The doorway leads to a small hotel on the second floor above the cafe. You remember it?" Umberto asked.

Mario and Paolo nodded in the dark.

"So. I took my stand inside that doorway where I could watch Vanucci. He kept looking at a watch on his wrist. He ordered coffee and drank it in small sips. I heard footsteps descending the stairway behind me from the hotel above. I moved out of the doorway, not wishing to be caught spying, and stepped to one side of it, where I raised my hands before my face and made a big business of lighting my pipe. Two men came down the steps from the hotel. They hesitated in the doorway a moment, searching with their eyes among the customers at the sidewalk tables. It was exactly two o'clock."

"Ah," said Paolo softly. "And they approached Vanucci?"

"No," said Umberto, "but they saw him sitting there, you may be sure. He was facing outward toward the Canal, sitting in his chair so that his back was toward them. So they walked casually past his

table where he could not fail to see them as he sipped his coffee.

"I thought they did not know him, nor he them. Until, just as they passed his table, he looked up and gave the very smallest of nods to them. And held up three fingers on his left hand, as though he were testing for a breeze. That was all. They walked down to the bridge and climbed the steps to cross it. He finished his coffee quietly."

"What were they like, these two men?" Paolo asked.

"Big men," said Umberto shrugging. "Very ordinary men. They looked Italian, but could have been American, I suppose."

Mario said quietly, "The biggest one had a piece off his right ear. And the small one limped slightly. Did you notice it?"

"I noticed it. But how did you know?"

"I, too, have been playing detective," Mario answered lightly. "Proceed."

"Vanucci stayed at the cafe until he finished his coffee. Then he paid and walked toward the bridge. I thought perhaps he meant to join those two men who had crossed it before him. But he did not cross. Instead, he walked to Santa Maria Formosa and from there to the square in which stands the monument to Colleoni."

"By the Church of Saints Giovanni and Paolo."

"Yes. Vanucci circled the base of the monument several times,

pretending to inspect our bronze horseman like any American tourist. Then a tall man came out of a doorway across from the church and walked slowly toward the church door. The doorway from which he came was that of a wine shop with rented rooms above it. Vanucci looked away from the statue and saw this man go into the church, and he drifted toward the church door, too. And so did I.

"I followed him in very closely. It was dark and gloomy inside, of course. But I saw Vanucci and the tall one pass each other near the holy water font. And although I did not hear them speak, I saw Vanucci nod his head again. And then hold up two fingers on his left hand, which he had just dipped into the holy water, so that the tall man could see them. Then the tall one left the church."

Paolo said: "Was he carrying a briefcase, this tall man?"

Umberto was surprised. "Yes," he said. "Like a little suitcase. But how—"

Mario interrupted. "And he was very thin, with a big Adam's apple, and white hair and black eyebrows, and wore a watch fob hanging from a small pocket in his trousers. *E vero?*"

"Yes—yes," said Mario. "He pulled out the watch when he went into the church, to check it against the church chimes, I suppose. They were sounding three o'clock. His hair, however, was brown and his

eyebrows the same. But how do you know this man?"

"It was the man who blew up Colossimo's gondola," Paolo explained. "Colossimo described him to Mario. He carries his bombs in that briefcase, I suppose."

"And the other two men at Albergo Gozzi?"

"They broke Gregorio Sesta's arms," Mario said.

Umberto sucked on his pipe and blew a cloud of acrid smoke toward the Canal. He waved it away with his hand. His anger was slow, but deep-running and strong. It was present in his voice when he continued. "Vanucci left the church. I followed him again. He went shopping. He bought a Borsolino hat on the Mercerie, a pair of shoes, two paperweights of Venetian glass. He was just passing the time, in public, as much like an American tourist as possible, I thought. He made no more nods nor finger signals to anyone.

"Afterward, he went to a small hotel near Taverna La Fenice and entered. He did not come out again until dinnertime. He lives there. For I sat in the bar and saw him come down the stairs without his packages, and turn in his key at the desk. He went to Antico Martini restaurant for dinner, speaking to no one save his waiter, making signals to no one. He drank Soave Bolla with his meal, and ate langousta in huge quantities. He feeds like a pig."

Mario spat in disgust. Paolo thought his thoughts for a moment, conscious of a faint stirring of excitement and hope inside his rib cage.

"After dinner, what did he do?" he asked Umberto.

"Nothing. He dawdled over dinner interminably. Then he came directly here to our arbor to talk with you. When he left a few moments ago, I waited in the Calle Larga until he came out of the Regina alley. I followed him a little way to be sure he was returning to his hotel."

Umberto knocked the dottle out of his pipe with a series of sharp, echoing taps of the bowl on the edge of the plank table. "That's all there was," he said, "and I would like to know what it means."

"You have done well, old man," Paolo said. "Your sharp eyes caught the signals Vanucci made to his men, although he was clearly trying very hard to avoid anyone seeing that he knew those men. I think there is only one way to explain those signals. He had just promised me more accidents would happen to our brothers. When he nodded to those two men at Albergo Gozzi, he was saying to them, yes, injure some more gondoliers before their Council meeting tonight."

"And when he held up three fingers to them, he meant three gondoliers should be injured. The same with the tall thin bomber.

Vanucci was telling him in the church to continue his terrorism, to blow up two more gondolas today. Can you see any other explanation?"

"I don't even understand that one," Umberto said.

"I forget you have been out of touch today. You don't know the latest news. After Vanucci left here this afternoon, with you trailing him, and before our Council meeting tonight, three more gondoliers were attacked and hurt. Two more gondolas were blown up on the water."

"Ah," said Umberto, nodding, "now I see." He paused. Then he murmured, "And I believe I see something else as well, Paolo."

"What?" asked Mario.

Before Umberto could reply, Paolo broke in. "It is at least a justifiable hope," he said slowly. "Although not yet a certainty by any means." He slanted a warning glance at Umberto. Then he turned to Mario and explained: "Umberto thinks, like me, that he has almost proved something by his work today. He thinks he has proved that Vanucci does not have a large organization here in Venice, despite his boasts. That his staff numbers only three—the two big men at Albergo Gozzi and the thin explosives expert with the briefcase."

"Ho!" said Mario in a loud, relieved voice. "If this is, indeed, so—"



Paolo was cautious. "We do not know it is so. We only suspect, and hope. And we must be very sure before we act. I charge you to say nothing of our conclusion to anyone. Understood? Least of all to any hot-headed gondolier. For it is the safety, health and future of our whole brotherhood we are gambling with here, you realize. We cannot afford to be premature." He smiled at Mario's huge bulk in the darkness. "Is it agreed?" he asked softly.

"Of course, Paolo," Mario said. "I shall say nothing. You know me. I burn to strangle Vanucci, that is all. I can wait."

"And you?" Paolo asked Umberto.

"Me also," the old man said. "You make the decisions, Paolo. You lead, we follow. It has always

been so since the three of us have served this mooring. Continue to lead us. Tell us what we must do. How can we be sure that Vanucci is bluffing a brotherhood of many hundreds of men with three pitiful American gangsters?"

"Listen," said Paolo, leaning forward across the table and emphasizing his words with a tapping finger, "this is what we must do. Vanucci has promised still more mishaps to gondoliers by Friday night. You heard him just now, Mario. We must take a hidden interest in every gondolier who is attacked. We investigate each mishap carefully but indirectly, without making too much of it.

"Vanucci must never suspect for a moment that we are nosing around, or we may die suddenly, my friends. But let us see if anyone else could possibly be involved in causing these accidents besides those three *maiale* you saw Vanucci signalling to today, Umberto.

"It saddens me that we cannot stop the attacks before they occur. But we must be sure of our ground. Four men, alone and known, is one thing. But a large organization of ruthless criminals from America with machine guns, bombs, torture and death we must not bring down on our brotherhood. We must be *sure*, for a man must live with his conscience."

Umberto and Mario agreed. They would make sure by Friday night.

AND THEY DID. As the setting sun painted the flagstones of their arbor gold on Friday evening, Mario reported almost gaily to Paolo, "Sometimes they wear masks of Chinamen or demons or black men instead of monkey faces. But it is always two large masked men, one slightly larger than the other, who waylay the gondoliers in deserted *calle* at night and beat them and break their bones. The sliced-off earlobe of the larger man has been noticed twice, the limp of the smaller man was noticed at least three times."

"In every case of a bombed gondola," said Umberto, "the last passenger before the explosion was a tall man with a package. Sometimes he has black hair or red or gray. Sometimes he looks fat with what I believe must be pillows under his belt. Sometimes he carries a paper bag or a cardboard box or a brief case. But he is always tall. Two of his victims noticed his large Adam's apple. Three noticed a watch fob."

"It is the same man," Paolo said, smiling. "And the two others are the same as well. Vanucci has only three men. I consider it certain."

Both his friends agreed.

"Very well," said Paolo. He stared thoughtfully at the Lido *motoscafo* as it passed noisily up the Canal. "Now we can act without endangering the lives of our brothers in the *confraternita*.

"Call in the police, you mean?" asked Mario reluctantly.

Paolo grinned at him. "You know I don't. Since when has the society of gondoliers had to call on the police to do its work for it?"

Mario flexed his great hands and leaned forward eagerly. Umberto smiled a broad smile that deepened noticeably all the myriad wrinkles in his weathered face.

"Tonight the members of the brotherhood meet to vote on Vanucci's protection money," Paolo said. "But we can have the matter almost settled before the meeting. Then I can give the brothers good news, instead of asking them to approve a five percent raise in dues. I can tell them we have scotched the threat of Vanucci. That they need fear nothing henceforth. We can guarantee that not a single gondolier will ever be attacked again, nor a single gondola blown up, eh?"

"That would be the finest word we could bring them," Umberto said.

"I shall bring it to them," Paolo said. "You two will be busy. Will you mind very much missing the meeting?"

"Not at all," said Mario cheerfully, "if you want us to be busy elsewhere. Eh, Umberto?"

"It is true."

"Very well. I shall mention your names and give you full credit at the meeting," Paolo promised. "Meanwhile, Mario,

when it is full dark, and any suitable time between now and midnight, will you take care of the two men who live at Albergo Gozzi? And you, Umberto, do you think you can handle the tall one whose room looks out on the Colleoni statue?"

Both men nodded, pleasure showing in their eyes.

"I suggest," Paolo went on, "that you be in position before dark. One does not know whether they will have assignments from Vanucci tonight or not. Perhaps Vanucci considers that he has applied enough 'psychology' to sway the votes tonight in his favor. But no matter. Your best chance to find them is near the dinner hour. Now. What they do after dark will affect what you do, I suppose." He smiled. "Is it clear?"

"It is clear," said Umberto. "But what of Vanucci himself, the mother snake of this nest?"

"He shall be my responsibility," said Paolo gently. "He comes here at midnight to collect his first protection payment. I shall welcome him, never fear."

"But," Mario objected, "I could easily get back here in time to handle this one for you. Or, indeed, take care of him before I approach the others. If Umberto will kindly show me which is his hotel you may leave the rest to me."

"No," said Paolo, "although I thank you for the thought. As you say, he is the mother snake. And

this one I would dispose of myself in person."

Mario pressed him. "Suppose he doesn't come at midnight? Or suppose he intends to bring his jackals with him to collect the money and finds out meanwhile that Umberto and I have made his men unavailable?"

"He'll come," Paolo said confidently. "He is not the type, this one, to fail an appointment which he himself has dictated. Nor to bring underlings with him when he does business. Oh, no, he will come to me at midnight. His greed will bring him." Paolo looked significantly at the fading sunlight.

Umberto took the hint. "Time we were off," he said. "Come, Mario."

"Good luck," Paolo called after them.

AT MIDNIGHT, Paolo pulled his gondola in between the mooring poles of the *Regina* mooring and made fast. He extinguished his riding lights, leaving his oar in its fork. When he leaped lightly ashore, he found Pietro Vanucci waiting for him in the arbor, a black shadow against gray ones.

Vanucci spoke in a low voice, almost a whisper. "Have you got the money, boatman?" He was sure of victory. He couldn't keep the triumph submerged in him. It bubbled up, even into his whisper.

"I have it, Signor Vanucci," said Paolo. He made no attempt to

lower his voice, although the hotels were now silent and each word carried well so near the water of the Grand Canal. "The vote of the brotherhood was unanimously in favor of paying you what you ask for protection. Our members are quite weary of being beaten and deprived of their gondolas. They will pay you to protect them."

"Good," said Vanucci. He extended a hand toward Paolo. "I hope you complimented them on their good sense. Now they will be safe. As long as they pay their dues faithfully. I'll want a monthly list, of course, of all delinquents so my men can reason with them. Give me the money."

"Here is the money, Signor Vanucci. But I beg of you, do not withdraw your protection from any of us who may happen temporarily to be without funds to pay your dues. Sometimes it is completely unavoidable."

"Knock it off," Vanucci said. "You'll try to tell me my business once too often, boatman. The money. Hand it over."

"It is here. But I wish you to remember, Signor Vanucci, that I am secretary of our brotherhood. As such, I have responsibilities. There are certain formalities to be observed. If you would kindly give me a receipt for these lire, I could then—"

Pietro Vanucci laughed aloud. "You kill me, you stupid canoe-jockey," he said. "You really do.

A receipt! That's pretty funny, you know it? Give me the money, clown, or I'll have to take it." The starlight glinted on a revolver barrel as Vanucci moved.

Paolo handed over a thick pad of thousand-lire notes bound together with a rubber band.

Vanucci thrust it into his inside pocket carelessly, without counting it. "Okay," he said. "This is the first one. I'll expect a pay-off from you every month on this date. Remember I've got a lot of men to help me collect it. So have it, sonny. Along with that list of delinquents. Understand?"

Paolo said, "I understand."

Suddenly Vanucci said: "What's that?" He stepped toward the border of the Canal. Standing at the edge of the landing platform above the moored gondolas, he peered out across the water. The silhouette of a dark gondola slid away downstream, an almost indistinguishable gondolier swinging the oar.

"That guy just took off from here!" Vanucci said harshly. "From right here by this platform!" He still held the gun in his hand. "He was listening to us."

Paolo hid a smile. "It is nothing, *signor*," he said. "It is almost certainly one of the brotherhood who followed me here from the meeting on instructions of the president, to make sure I met you and gave you our protection money." This was the simple

truth. Paolo had heard the faint squeak of the fellow's oar behind him all the way home from the meeting in the society's *scuola* near the Accademia.

"They don't trust you, eh?" Vanucci said, relaxing slightly.

"Why should they?" asked Paolo carefully. "After all, they had only my word for it that a man named Pietro Vanucci exists; that it is you who are causing injuries to gondoliers all over Venice; that it is you who are demanding payment of blackmail money from our society."

"Protection money," Vanucci growled absently, "not blackmail." He was thinking over Paolo's words. "I guess you have a point. It could be you, going into the protection business yourself, couldn't it? And this Vanucci could be just a name you made up. But now they know you're leveling with them, is that it? Now that that spy has heard us talking, and seen the money passed from you to me. And heard you trying to get a proper receipt for the cash. They're sure that you are a man to be trusted."

He laughed heartily, seemingly delighted all over again at the idea of anyone asking for a receipt for blackmail money. "You're not as dumb as I thought, sonny," he said in high good humor. "That's why you were shouting out my name so loud all the time that spy was here, isn't it?"

"One must protect oneself," said Paolo quietly.

Then suddenly, without warning, he thrust out his stiffened arms and pushed Vanucci's squat body with irresistible force off the edge of the landing platform into the Canal.

As he went in, Vanucci uttered one short grunt of surprise and fury, but could not swing his revolver around toward Paolo before the oily canal water closed over the hand that held it.

Paolo used the forward momentum of his push to carry him in a scrambling leap to the rear platform of his gondola, moored just beside the spot where Vanucci struck the water. Quickly he wrapped his long fingers about the butt of his beechwood oar, lifted it from its walnut *farcola* so that it swung free in his hands, and faced the water of the canal where Vanucci's thrashing body now broke the surface.

Like a medieval knight jousting with leveled lance, he placed the end of his long oar delicately and firmly upon the round shape that was Vanucci's head emerging from the water, and gently forced it down again beneath the surface. All this occurred quietly, circumstantly, as though in a shadow play, save for the one audible grunt of surprise and the negligible splash that announced Vanucci's entry into the canal.

When Paolo lifted his oar,

Vanucci bobbed to the surface, gasping, coughing, struggling to breathe, but Paolo's oar immediately descended with inexorable accuracy to push his head under the water once more.

It was a game Paolo played with unashamed relish. He handled the long heavy oar like a matchstick, smiling a little to himself as he skillfully kept Vanucci's head always a few inches below the surface and prevented his bursting lungs from sucking in even a single mouthful of air.

The oar with which Paolo daily propelled his thousand-pound gondola so easily was a perfect instrument for his purpose. It seemed to have a vital life of its own as it escaped Vanucci's madly groping hands time after time, and descended time after time as lightly as eiderdown but as heavily as death on the crown of his head.

When, at length, Vanucci drowned and lay inert, Paolo drew his heavy body toward the gondola, using the oar like a boat-hook. He leaned far over the side, got a grip on Vanucci's jacket collar, and with his other hand, fumbled the sheaf of banknotes, now a soggy mass, from Vanucci's inside pocket.

He looked once into the fat, no-longer-threatening face of the American 'tourist' before he loosened his hold upon the man's coat, and gave the body a contemptuous

push with his oar out toward the center of the canal. It was unmarked by violence. Just an awkward American who had fallen into the canal and stupidly drowned.

TEN MINUTES LATER, Mario walked spring-legged but noiselessly into the arbor. He nodded cheerfully to Paolo who was seated on his regular crate at the plank table, placidly smoking a cigarette in the darkness. Mario said in a quiet voice, "All is well, Paolo," and sat down.

The old-fashioned phrase pleased Paolo. "All is well with me, too," he answered and drew on his cigarette until the end glowed brightly.

Umberto came out of the darkness of the alley-mouth beside the hotel. He joined them at the table. "It is finished," he said. He began to load his pipe.

"You first, Umberto," Paolo said after a moment. He felt a little light-headed, suddenly. "Tell us, Umberto, my old friend."

"It was simple," said Umberto, keeping his tone very low. "I went to the wine shop above which the tall one lived." Umberto used the past tense deliberately and with pleasure. "The shop closed at eleven o'clock. But a light remained above. I could see the tall one pass back and forth occasionally.

"I broke into the shop when the

proprietor had gone home. I took a bottle of wine from the shelf and went up the inside stairs to the rooms above. I knocked on the tall one's door. When he opened it, I struck him on the temple with the bottle of wine. I caught him in my arm as he collapsed and went into the room with him and shut the door. On the table I found a bomb he had been making to destroy a gondola with."

Umberto laughed softly. "It was primitive," he said, "that bomb. Explosives expert, indeed! A piece of iron pipe, merely, with explosive inside and a fuse. I lit the fuse on this bomb and placed it in the tall man's pocket and quickly left the room, closing the door behind me. I replaced the wine bottle on the shelf in the shop below, and was four streets away when the bang came."

"Excellent," said Paolo, nodding his approbation. "You returned to look?"

"I did. The tall one is truly dead, Paolo. Tonight he had golden hair and eyebrows. Isn't that amusing?"

Mario said: "You are a sly one, Umberto. Pretending to shyness with your friends, but a veritable tiger to your enemies! I, too, acted bravely and wisely tonight. Don't you wish to hear of it?"

"Tell us," said Paolo and Umberto together.

Mario obliged with some grandiloquence. "I marked my two

Americans at Albergo Gozzi. Do you know where they went to-night? The cinema! Isn't that laughable? To see our famous Italian actress with the generous bosom, eh? I therefore went to the cinema as well. She is a lovely armful, that big-busted girl. I must compliment the two Americans on their taste in women, at least. When they left the cinema, I followed as quietly as a kitten walking in snow. In a dark *calle*, near Fondamente Nuove, I crept up behind them and knocked their heads together, so . . ."

Mario demonstrated with his spectacularly muscled arms. He laughed with delight. "And do you know what I said, just as I knocked the heads? I said, 'This wouldn't happen if you had protection, Americans.' Oh, they knew why they died before they were dead. You may take my word for it."

"I am glad," said Umberto. "My boat-destroyer did not, to my shame."

"You could not arrange it," Mario said magnanimously. "It will not matter, since my two can tell yours in hell."

Paulo said: "What did you do with them, Mario?"

"They had knives. Each a knife that opened quickly to show a big blade. While they were senseless from my knocking of heads, I cut each with the other's knife in many places. And finally stabbed

each badly, to die. I took their American passports and cut the labels off their clothes. Then I carried them to the Fondamente Nuove and tossed them into the water, their knives, too."

Mario shrugged indifferently. "They are carrion. The tide will take them to sea." He paused and looked at Paolo expectantly. "And you?" he asked. "What of the 'mother snake' you wanted for yourself?"

Paolo told them about Vanucci. Except for the money and the spy. He didn't mention these, being still uncertain.

When he had finished, both his friends exclaimed in admiration at the justice of killing a blackmailer of gondoliers with a gondolier's weapon. "It is like poetry, Paolo," Mario said exuberantly. "It is sweet, it is tender, it sings to my heart."

Umberto puffed on his pipe and nodded. Waving the smoke away from his face, Umberto said, "And how went the meeting, Paolo? Were our members duly grateful to you and to us for removing the great threat of Vanucci from them?" He chuckled.

Paolo said nothing.

When the silence had endured a long instant, Mario said: "Did you tell them the increase in dues wasn't necessary after all, Paolo? That we had seen to that?"

Still Paolo said nothing. He felt again the touch of lightheaded-

ness. Now, at the end, he was obscurely troubled. He hesitated to speak. But Umberto forced him.

"What is it, Paolo?" he said. "Confide in us."

"I didn't tell them the threat of blackmail was finished," Paolo said finally. "I recommended they vote to pay Vanucci his protection money. And they did it, just as I urged them. I told them our investigations had revealed that Pietro Vanucci has a formidable organization in Venice. That our gondoliers had no recourse but to pay him for protection."

Umberto and Mario looked at him as though he had taken leave of his senses, as indeed they thought he had. "You told the brotherhood that?" asked Mario incredulously.

"And let them vote for an increase in dues?" Umberto was shocked.

Paolo nodded. "I did," he said, calm now. "Look." He took from his pocket the soggy mass of thousand-lire notes and dropped it on the table. "This is the money the brotherhood bade me pay Vanucci for his first month's protection. Count it. It is wet, but still money. And it is ours instead of Vanucci's."

He let them think a little then, lighting another cigarette and smoking it a quarter through before Umberto's next question came.

"Why, Paolo?" he asked, hon-

estly puzzled. "Why have you done this? Not, surely, for this little stack of dirty money here?"

"Yes, for the money," Paolo returned stoutly. "But not for just *that* stack. For many stacks—one every month from now on, to be split between the three of us. It will mean luxury for us. No more scraping along on the starvation wages of a gondolier which you yourself complained about to Vanucci, Umberto."

He told them then about the gondolier who had followed him to the arbor from the meeting and eavesdropped upon his exchange with Vanucci. "The brotherhood knows there *is* a Vanucci, now. And that I paid him, in good faith, our first month's protection. I am the official contact with Vanucci, remember. Each month I shall receive a similar payment for Vanucci. But I shall keep it for us."

HIS FRIENDS WERE silent, looking at him stealthily from the corners of their eyes.

"Gondoliers are practical people, I believe," Paolo said. "And I am a gondolier. I was practical, that is all, Mario, Umberto. Can you not understand it? I was practical for all three of us. Tell me. Have we protected our brotherhood from further attacks upon its members and its boats, or not?"

Mario said: "Yes, but—"

"Yes. Of course we have," Pa-

olo broke in. "We have killed four men tonight, to protect our brotherhood. So we deserve the protection money raised for that purpose, do we not?"

Umberto smiled. "Do not gull us, Paolo, with such sophistries," he said. "I did murder tonight, thinking it was for the brotherhood. Now you tell me I did murder for you and Mario and myself. The fact is, you have taken over Vanucci's racket, have you not?"

"The protection idea has certain things to recommend it," Paolo acknowledged. "It is a sound money-making idea, even though American. And we have not hurt or beaten any of our membership, nor blown up any gondolas, remember that. Vanucci did that. We could not prevent it. But we can take advantage of his groundwork, as it were, to collect protection money for ourselves. Isn't that practical? It is just a case of turning the tables."

Paolo allowed the thought of their new monthly wealth to work in their minds for a moment. He let them consider his specious reasoning as to practicality and basic innocence. They were simple men. He had always been able to sway and lead them, just as Umberto had said. He felt confident that he could do it now. He thought he could see their thoughts reflected transparently in their shadowed faces across the table

from him: greed, hope, amazement at his duplicity.

The damp night air of Venice smelled sweetly tainted now off the canals, and the pathetic vines growing on their little arbor rustled briefly in a breeze. The Regina Hotel close by was as silent as a deserted tomb—or as Mario and Umberto, lost in thought.

At length Umberto spoke for both. "Paolo," he said wearily, disillusion in his voice, "of course we would like the money. Who wouldn't? But the money is dirty, Paolo. Can't you see that? It is filthy money, unclean, immoral—because you get it by betraying the gondoliers of Venice who trust you. They barely manage to live on their present wages. You know that very well."

"Yet you falsely robbed them tonight of money they desperately need when you urged them to vote larger dues to buy protection that is no longer necessary." His voice trailed off miserably, but there was no doubt of his disapproval. It fought with his friendship for Paolo, but it was there. And Mario was nodding solemnly in agreement.

So Paolo played his trump, deeming the time ripe, and desperately anxious to retain the friendship and respect of these two worthy men. "Listen," he said quietly. "I am a practical man. I admit it. I like money. But I am not a heartless man, nevertheless.

I am not a pig like Vanucci who would deprive his own mother if there were no one else to rob. No. I am a gondolier, like you. I am a member of the brotherhood, like you. I am its secretary, in fact. And the welfare of its members is the highest duty I owe to life. I would never rob them."

Mario protested, "You *have* robbed them. Doesn't it come to that?"

"No," Paolo said. "It does not. It is true that I urged them to vote protection money for Vanucci. But I also suggested a way they could raise this money without depleting their earnings."

Mario said uncomprehendingly: "You did what?"

"I proposed," said Paolo, "that the brotherhood post a general increase in its rates. That the official cost of hiring a gondola be increased from two thousand lire an hour to two thousand-one hundred lire."

"Ho!" said Umberto suddenly, boisterously, in the hoarse, carrying voice he used as a warning to other gondoliers when he approached a blind corner in one of the *piccoli canali*, the small canals.

"Yes," Paoli continued. "It is an insignificant increase, but more than enough to pay that five percent increase in dues. And it will leave the gondoliers many extra lire for themselves, besides. My resolution was voted on. It passed

unanimously. So I have not robbed the brotherhood, you see? I have increased the wages of every member instead."

Paolo sat back and puffed on his cigarette, a long puff that brought the glowing coal very close to his lips. He could feel the heat. Mario and Umberto were regarding him, pop-eyed and speechless. He saw clearly that the disapproval that had sat heavily on their features was rapidly changing to joy and admiration. Even in the gloom, he could see that. He sighed with relief.

"They will pay it, *amico*," said Paolo confidently. "Never fear. Tourists will pay anything for a few moments of romance—and a gondola ride in Venice is still extremely romantic."

Mario said, "I believe you are right, Paolo," and relapsed into pleasant contemplation of his future prosperity.

Paolo threw his cigarette cartwheeling through the darkness into the Grand Canal. The coal winked out at exactly the spot where Vanucci had been drowned. "The irony of it is," said Paolo dreamily, "that instead of hundreds of Venetian gondoliers paying protection to four American tourists, now hundreds of American tourists will be paying protection to three Venetian gondoliers."

They rose and shook hands in the darkness.

The Frightened Sky-Girl

The girl on the flying trapeze was in the deadliest kind of danger. And with a killer at large Costello didn't feel very calm himself.

by ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

MACK COSTELLO's face looked pale in the dim light as he stood on the floor of the darkened auditorium, beside the center ring-curb. He was staring upward at a tiny golden figure that looped and twirled in criss-crossing spotlights, high in the dome overhead.

"Sure is high up, ain't she?" he said anxiously.

Jack Johns, the circus manager, standing beside him, nodded proudly. "Yes, indeed," he said

above the brass band's waltz music. "Highest act in show business —inside a building, that is. There are midway acts, on fairs and carnivals, that use taller riggings. But on a show like this, Norma Laform, the Sky Girl is in a class by herself. She works right up in the rafters."

"Yeah!" Mack Costello shivered. "Too high, if you ask me! It's a suicide act. If she ever falls she'll be dead. Oh, I know turns like

A NEW "BULL" COSTELLO CIRCUS MYSTERY



that are popular nowadays. The Giraldos, Rose Gold, the Wallendas—two of them was killed only last spring. But I don't like to watch them myself. Don't seem like they belong on our kind of circus. More like the one of Ancient Rome."

"Oh, it's not quite that bad," the circus manager assured him. "This is an indoor show—not like the tent outfits. Our rigging isn't hung on swaying tent-poles. It's guyed to steel girders and cross-beams, firm as the building itself. It's a lot safer than the outdoor rig. And no wind, or rain, because weather doesn't mean a thing in here."

"Maybe." The big man shook his head stubbornly. "But also there ain't no soft lot dirt, to fall on! Just a concrete floor, mostly as hard as a rock. You don't even spread sawdust over it—not that you could pile it thick enough to do much good. Just this thin matting." He kicked at the green co-coa-fibre moodily.

"They won't let us use sawdust, most places," Jack Johns said. "Too messy, and hard to clean up afterward. I only wish we could use it, as it would give a little circus atmosphere. Hard to get that inside a building. The matting's a compromise. It's really for the animals, so they'll have footing, and won't slip when they gallop. It's not to protect the aerialists. They just have to rely on their own skill

and dexterity. Of course, I've got trained prop men standing around under Norma, while she's working. They'd do their best to catch her, if she ever fell."

"Humph!" Costello snorted. "You ever try to catch a fallin' human body from that height? It comes down like a rock, and twice as heavy from gravity. Most they could do would be to break her fall a little—an' probably be crippled for life tryin' it. Like Alzana's old man, when he caught her in the Garden. Only safe way would be to use a net."

"Norma won't use one!" Johns said. "She never has, in all the years she's been performing. It would spoil the thrill of her act, she says. I've argued with her, everybody has. But she won't listen. High acts are all crazy anyway. I admit I hold my breath every time she's up. But she's never actually fallen, even with these mishaps lately. I just hope to God she doesn't, on my show!"

The two men were silent, staring up at the tiny figure, now dangling from one bare heel from her trapeze, and blowing kisses down at the crowd.

"Yeah, the Laforms always was ones for takin' chances," Costello said, after a moment. "Not a nerve in their bodies, seems like. Norma was the same way. She used to scare the living daylights out of me, in the old days. She sure reminds me of her ma. Looks just

like her, and works like her. Almost a double."

"You know Miss Laform then?" Jack Johns shot a curious glance at him. "Odd. She didn't tell me that. Just said she'd sent for you, and you'd be here tonight, and I was to look out for you, if you arrived while she was up. She didn't have to tell me who you were, of course. Everybody in show business has heard of 'Bull' Costello! You were just about the best circus cop in the business, before you retired. But she didn't mention that you were a friend of hers."

"Oh, we ain't." The old man shook his head, vigorously. "I doubt she even remembers me. Last time I seen her she was only about eight. But I knowed her whole family. I trouped with the Laforms on several shows. Wonderful people, and fine performers, though not stars like she is. Though her ma, after her husband died, worked out a single act that had the center spot on more than one big outfit.

"She wasn't quite as famous as Lilly Leitzell, or Irma Ward. But she was mighty good. And the loveliest woman I ever seen in a circus ring. Hard to realize she's been gone twenty years. She was killed in a blowdown on the Cole Show, in forty-two."

Costello stared off bleakly across the arena, and was silent again. "Kid went to an aunt in Europe, I heard," he went on.

"She growed up on the Continent, became a star there, an' married there, to some foreign aerialist. Johnny North imported both of them three years ago as European acts. Doubt if he knowed she was American.

"Then her husband went back to Europe for a winter engagement, and was killed in a fall. Now she's carryin' on alone like her ma before her. Funny how them things run in families! I followed her whole career in the 'Billboard' and 'Amusement Business' for old times sake, but our paths ain't crossed since. So of course I came quick when I got her wire, though I got no idea what she wants."

"Well, she'll be down in a minute. You can renew acquaintance," the circus manager said, absently. "She's starting her planges now. They're her finale."

The band's music had now broken off, save for a long, nerve-wracking drum roll, and a crash of cymbals as the almost naked figure started slowly to revolve.

"Oh, oh!" Costello muttered, disappointed. "She don't do planges as good as her ma!"

"I don't understand it." Jack Johns was biting his lips. "Something's wrong! She was away off, on that first one. Almost didn't get over. Didn't seem like her fault, either. More like the rigging wabbled."

"Oh, no, that *couldn't* be," the big man reminded him, with heavy

sarcasm. "It's hung on solid steel, remember? It can't wabble. Oh, my God! Hear that?"

There had been a sudden, sharp *pinging* sound, audible even above the drum roll. In the dim light a shining silver thread was suddenly visible, swinging back and forth across the arena, and lashing savagely.

"One of her ground guys," Johns gasped. "It snapped—the metal must have crystallized. Stop the act!"

Johns ran forward, shouting to his Equestrian Director. "Whistle her down, Mike. She can't finish with her rig loose like that. She'll break her neck if she tries it. Get her down, and grab that wire someone, before it lashes out into the audience, and hurts somebody!"

Half a dozen property men were clutching wildly at the elusive cable. But incredibly, it was Mack Costello who got it first. For all his age and bulk, the old man could run like a deer. He'd crossed the center ring in a flash, expertly snagged the wire, pulled it back taut, and calmly sat down on the track with it.

"It's okay," he called to the manager. "Let her go ahead, and finish. I'll hold it steady for her. No use spoilin' her finale."

"But my God, man!" Johns remonstrated. "You can't hold a guy wire with your bare hands!"

Nobody can. It'll cut them to ribbons."

"I ain't just holdin' it with my hands." Costello said placidly. "I'm sitting on it, too. I weigh more'n three hundred pounds, Mister! When I sit on something, it stays put! Lot firmer than that ring it was tied to originally. Ground guy don't hold up nothing anyway. It just steadies. Let her go ahead."

"Very well, if you say so."

Johns shrugged. He gave the signal, and the drum roll and cymbal-crash resumed.

Far aloft the tiny figure that had been hanging by one wrist and staring down in bewilderment started once more to whirl. Over and over she went, a long series of perfect one-arm planges that brought the crowd to its feet in wild applause. While the wire that Mack Costello grasped held her rigging just as firm as the other three.

A moment more, and the act was over. Norma finished, saluted, then seized a second loop, and came swooping swiftly downward, in a cascade of glittering light-points. She landed in the center ring as lightly as a bird perching, snatched a spangled cape an attendant held for her, thrust her feet into ring-clogs, and posed, smiling and bland as if nothing had happened.

The audience's applause swelled into a full ovation that lasted for

minutes. But while it was still rag-ing, she turned and ran toward Mack Costello.

"Bull!" she cried. "Bull Costello, you old darleeng! You did come. You are here! And you saved my life, you angel!" She flung her arms about his neck, heedless of the crowd's laughter, and kissed him fondly.

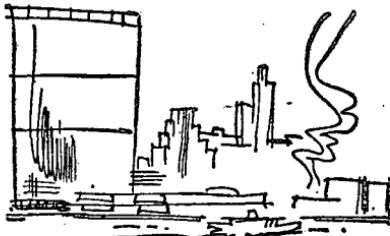
The big man scrambled hastily to his feet, blushing furiously. But looking pleased, just the same. "Aw, who you tryin' to kid, hon-ey?" he rumbled. "I didn't do nothing much. You'd have made out without me, a great performer like you. You'd have managed with the guy loose. I seen your ma ride buckin' rigs up there, lots of times. I bet you could, too, if you had to."

"Ah, but I did not have to," she told him, happily. "You were here to save me. Oh, but your poor hand! It is all cut!" She swooped at it, making little clucking sounds.

"Aw, it ain't nothing." Costello fended her off, clumsily knotting a bloody handkerchief about his left palm. "Can't even touch them durn wires without cutting yourself a little. They're like knife-blades. I got old scars from them all over both hands. It don't matter. I got good blood. I'll heal quick."

"But you must come to my dressing-room, and let me fix it properly for you. Please! I insist!"

She pulled at his arm. Costello hung back; a herd of five ele-



phants had lumbered into the cen-ter ring, and was beginning pon-derous evolutions. And getting Mack Costello away from an ele-phant act was normally like pulling teeth! His face had lit up like a small boy's at sight of them.

But, scolding, pleading and ca-joling, the small spangled figure literally hazed him out through a side entrance, and into a dim-lit corridor piled with circus gear. She hurried him past props, crates, tethered yapping poodles, and a couple of caged bears, and opened a door at the far end into a small cubicle.

"This," she announced, sarca-stically, "is the star's dressing room. Magnificent, is it not? But it is in my contract, that I am always to have one. And, of course, the show does not build the auditoriums. I make out, with what is available."

She pulled him inside, and closed the door, hurriedly.

"It's also in my contract that I have a maid," she went on, in an altered voice. "But you know what help is like in this country nowa-

days! She quit last week, and they haven't replaced her. I'm looking after myself. But I've got a first-aid kit here in my trunk—always keep it handy. We aerialists are always banging ourselves up. And I'm good at bandaging. Sit down, and let me see that hand.

Costello perched himself precariously on a canvas stool, and held his hand out obediently. "Seems like you got rid of your accent mighty quick, once we got in here!" he chuckled.

She smiled, absently. "Oh, I couldn't pull that stuff with you, Bull dear! You knew me when. But Americans like their circus stars foreign, you know, especially on the Big Show where I was until recently. I find an accent useful. And actually, it's more natural for me to talk that way. After all my years over there, when I try to speak my own language, I still want to say, 'Hot dog, it's the cat's meow! Outdated stuff like that. That's the way they were talking when I was here last."

Mack Costello shook his head. "Lordy, Lordy! Guess that's so, come to think of it. Hard to realize it was that long. An' you're all growed up, an' world-famous, an' a widow like your ma. Sure makes a man feel his years. Seems to me like you ought to still be runnin' around in pinafores. You sure reminded me of your ma up there in tights. Like seein' Belle herself, come back to life."

Norma beamed. "That's the nicest compliment you could pay me," she assured him. "Everybody says I do look like Mom. And I try to copy her style as I remember it, and work the same way. I feel it sort of keeps her memory alive."

She finished the bandaging, and rose. "There!" she said. "That ought to take care of it. It was a deep cut. You really gripped that wire. They're nasty, all right. I fell off my rigging once, and caught a wire, and hung on it until they lowered me. All ten of my fingers were cut to the bone! But it was better than falling."

She closed her eyes, and shivered. "If I ever really fall, I'm through, you know. Even if I survived, which isn't likely, I'd never be able to perform again."

"Then why in blazes do you do it?" the old man snorted. "You don't have to. An act as good as yours don't need that extra hazard. Why don't you work at a safe level with something underneath?"

"But then I wouldn't be 'Norma, The Sky Girl'" she said simply.

Costello shrugged, and changed the subject. "What did you want to see me about? Couldn't have been just to gossip about old times, though Lord knows I'd come this far for that any time. But I gathered from your telegram you wanted me to do something for you. What was it?"

"Why, just what you did do, darling—save my life!"

Costello blinked. "But that ain't possible. It was just an accident. You couldn't have knowned it was going to happen in advance." Then his eyes narrowed. "Hey, wait a minute! You mean it *wasn't* an accident at all? Somebody made it happen, on purpose?"

"Yes." The beautiful face suddenly had lines in it that made it look ten years older. The eyes were haunted pools. "That's what I mean, Bull. I didn't know what was going to happen tonight, of course. But I was sure something would. It does, at almost every show. This isn't the first time, by any means. There've been five to date. *Five*, in less than two weeks!"

He whistled, softly. "Say, that does seem too many."

"It is. I know the percentages in my act, Bull. I ought to, I've been doing it most of my life. Mis-haps from mechanical failure average about one a year, often less. And now so many, in so short a time. It just couldn't happen naturally. Somebody's making it happen. Someone is trying to kill me!"

"I don't know who it is. I've no idea even. But there's no question about it in my mind. And unless you can find out who it is, and stop him, my next performance may be my last."

"That's why I sent for you. You're my only hope. There's no use going to the local police.

They'd only laugh at me. I know you're retired now, but they tell me you still take occasional crime cases, as a sort of hobby, and that you've done some remarkable things.

"I'll pay you anything you want. I'm not rich, but I make a good salary and you can have every cent of it, if you'll only help me. I can't go on like this! I'm crackin' up, my nerve's going. I have to force myself each time I go up! I'm begging you, for old times sake—"

Costello turned toward her, scowling. "Shut up!" he growled. "I'm tryin' to think. You don't have to argue. I already took your case, and I'm workin' on it. And quit wavin' your money at me. Think I'd take it from you? Your ma would come back and haunt me if I did. Just be quiet, so I can figure things out."

He paced the tiny cubicle furiously, his big body casting gigantic shadows. "By golly!" he rumbled. "You could commit a murder that way, at that. Never been done, as far as I know, but it could be. Maybe it has been done. There is never any investigation; you high acts take such chances, anything that happens is always assumed to be natural. An' town cops don't know anything about circus ways; they ain't interested."

"Slick way of committing a crime, all right; feller would get off scott free! But what kind of a

man would do a thing like that, to a swell girl like you? Somebody sure must hate you an awful lot. You got enemies? Anybody who's got it in for you, that much?"

Norma shook her head, bewilderedly. "No, not that I know of. But I suppose everyone makes enemies, even unknowing. I must have one; that's obvious, isn't it?"

"Yeah, if your theory's right." He towered over her, patted her bare shoulder clumsily. "Well, don't you worry no more about it, honey. If anything like that's going on, I'll find out, an' put a stop to it. You leave it to me. Ain't nobody going to bump off Belle Laform's daughter. You get dressed, an' go on down to your hotel. I'll join you there, in a couple of hours; after I've nosed around a little. Remember now—just stop worrying."

He strode to the door, and flung it open. "Hey, you!" he bawled, to a passing attendant. "Go tell Jack Johns I want to talk to him. Also th' Boss Prop Man, Boss Rigger, an' any performers you can find. Show must be over by now; the band's stopped playing. Hurry, before they leave the building. Just tell them Mack Costello wants to see them. That ought to hold them.—So long, honey! I got to get busy!"

LONG AFTER he'd disappeared down the corridor, the echoes of his voice were still reverberating.

It set the poodles to barking, and the bears growling.

IT WAS A very different Mack Costello who turned into the lobby of Norma Laform's hotel some three hours after. His head was bowed and his shoulders drooping and he looked every day of his three-quarter century of years. He walked slowly, leaning heavily on his old-fashioned cane.

The hotel was only a few blocks from the auditorium, and distinctly inferior. Even in his gloom he eyed it critically. The lobby was huge, but very old fashioned. There were no bellboys, only a night clerk drowsing at the long desk. The clerk waved him toward the elevator when he gave his name, and said, "She's expecting you. Suite Three-A." He went back to sleep.

Costello squeezed his bulk into the rickety brass cage, pushed a button, and rose precariously to the third floor. He lumbered along a dim-lit corridor over a threadbare carpet, and managed to find the suite which the clerk had designated. He tapped on its panelled oak door, and a familiar voice answered.

"Come in, darling! I've been waiting for you."

He entered the suite, and closed the door. Norma was in the bedroom reclining, wearing a gold lame negligee, and obviously nothing else, and smiling a welcome.

"Make yourself at home, Bull. I haven't much to offer, in a place like this. But there's ice, and whisky. I even remembered your brand—Old Crow."

Costello sank into an overstuffed Morris chair, poured himself a huge drink, and started to roll a cigarette with brown paper and a bag of tobacco. "Kind of a dump, this place," he said. "Don't know what the circus management's thinkin' of, sticking you off in here. Sure ain't no advertisement for them. Think they'd want their star in the best hotel in town."

Norma shrugged. "Oh, there's some sort of Convention here this week. The good hotels are filled up. I was lucky to get a suite in this one. I don't mind it. It's quaint, and—she giggled, suddenly. "Don't you think the decor suits my personality?"

She was nodding toward the big oil painting that hung directly over the bed. It was a life-sized Victorian representation of SALEM, in a gilded plaster frame. It rose almost to the ceiling, and completely dominated the room.

Despite his mood, Costello grinned. "Yeah, it does at that. But don't it bother you, havin' a big thing like that hangin' over your head?"

"Oh, nothing bothers me tonight," Norma said. "I feel relaxed and safe for the first time in



weeks. Now that you're here I feel everything's going to be all right!"

He eyed her with a curious expression.

"Yes, it's just like old times, having you here," she went on, happily. "You were almost a father to me then. And I wish you'd been around when I married. You might have been able to advise me. Maybe I wouldn't have married the man I did."

He raised his eyebrows. "Why, what are you talkin' about, hon-

ey? The way the press agents played it up, you and that Polish aerialist, Jan What's-his-name, was one of the great romances of the Big Top!"

"Oh, they always do that; ever since Leitzell and Codona—actually, I understand they fought a lot, too. We certainly did! Our marriage was a mistake from the beginning. We'd separated long before he went back to Europe. We'd have been divorced by now if he hadn't died in that fall in Prague."

"Don't say? Nobody suspected. What was the trouble?"

"Oh, I suppose there were faults on both sides." Norma bit her lip, frowning. "We were both pretty young. Jan was handsome, glamorous and he swept me off my feet. He was a fine trapezist—the only man I ever met who could work at my height. We did an act together, when we first came over.

"But we didn't get along, in private. I'm an American girl, even though I was raised over there. I'm free and easy, and friendly with everyone. He was typically European, cold, reserved—and fiendishly jealous, if another man so much as spoke to me. We fought, all the time. And then, of course, he was a communist."

Costello yawned, cavernously. "Do tell! Never met a commie circus man. We're all what you might call super-Capitalistic. Still,

I guess they got plenty of them over there now. Some pretty good ones, too; judgin' by them Russian movies!"

"Well, he certainly was one. He did his best to make me one, and was furious when he didn't succeed. I think he was actually spying for them when we came over here. I caught him doing some peculiar things. I finally told him I'd had enough, and we split up, though we finished out our performing contracts. Then he went back to Prague for that winter engagement, and the next I heard, he'd fallen to his death.

"I couldn't even fly over for the funeral. I don't even know where he's buried. That's the true story, so you can see why I'm still single! Oh, I may try it again, some day. But if so, you can bet your sweet life he'll be an American."

Then Norma leaned forward. "But don't let's waste time talking about me! I'm anxious to know what you've found out. Oh, I know you haven't solved the case yet. But did you get any leads? Talk to anyone?"

Costello sighed wearily. "Oh, sure I talked to people. I talked to durn near the whole troupe." He grimaced, unhappily. "Sure never thought I'd see the day when you could interview a whole Three-Ring Circus in one evening. An outfit like this had seven or eight hunnerd people on it in the old days. Take a week to even contact

them all. But I bet there ain't a hundred now, even countin' animals! Can't even find the show in that giant of a buildin', once the crowd's out. Just a few props piled in the auditorium, and a few lonesome animals, stuck off in the basement. Sure ain't my idea of a circus lot. No tents, no fresh air, no sunlight, nobody to feed them peanuts even—poor critters. I don't know how they stand it. Or the people, either."

"Yes, I suppose it is like that," Norma said thoughtfully. "It seems more natural to me, of course, since I grew up on the Continent. Most of the European shows are indoors."

Costello nodded. "I interviewed the whole staff," he said. "Most of them sleep in trailers on a lot behind the building. I rousted them out. Some of them I knewed, or knowed their parents. I had a time tearin' myself away!"

He paused a moment. "But as for what I found out—" He paused again. "I don't know quite how to break this to you, honey, but it looks like I went off half-cocked when I said I'd do this job for you."

Norma stared at him, open-mouthed. All the radiance went out of her, and she seemed to wilt before his eyes. "Oh, my God!" she said huskily. "You don't mean—you can't mean—you're not going to take the case after all?"

"No, Norma. You know me better than that. But it just don't look like there's any case to take," he said. "I don't think anybody's tryin' to murder you. You just had an awful run of bad luck, that's all. You ain't got no enemies on this show. Everyone likes you, speaks highly of you. I didn't hear one word against you all evenin'. Most of them don't know you too well. You've only been on the outfit this season, and you keep to yourself and aren't much of a one for mingling.

"But they all say you're friendly, cooperative and don't pick fights, or pull rank on them. Lots of stars, especially imported ones, get a bad name that way, but you're an exception. They think you're wonderful. They all know about your accidents, and they're scared to death you'll quit the show on account of them. You're a big drawing card, makin' money for all. Why would anyone want to bump you off—less he's crazy?"

Costello looked at her obliquely. "There's one chance, of course. I want you to tell me the straight truth, honey. Do you chase around on the side? You know, go out with men in the various towns you play, get them jealous? They all say you don't, but you could be keepin' it secret. Don't be afraid to say so, if it's true."

Norma looked at him for a moment. "No, I don't, Bull," she

said, slowly. "That is the truth. Sometimes I wonder why I don't. I'm not the innocent little child you knew. I'm grown up. And there are many opportunities. I get invitations almost every night—flowers, presents. But it just doesn't appeal to me, somehow. I'll admit I tried it a few times in my younger days. But nothing recently—nothing that could possibly tie up with this."

Costello nodded. "It figures! Anyway, no outsider could possibly have faked those mishaps. Fact is, I don't see how anybody could have! Oh, sure, it looked like that way at first. It just didn't seem possible so many accidents could be natural. But that was before I talked to your prop crew. They're as upset over them as you are. They're goin' crazy tryin' to prevent them. But they swear up and down they was all legitimate accidents. They couldn't have been staged. The one tonight was the only one that happened on the ground. Others were all in the air, to the riggin' itself. They watch it like hawks. They won't even let no one get near it when they're unloadin' it, and puttin' it together.

"Once they've hoisted it, it's *up!* Nobody could get near it. It's way up in the dome, twenty feet or more above the other riggin'. You're the only one dares go up there. And the only way you can do it, is be pulled up on a rope by five or six men. Anyone tam-

perin' would have to have half a dozen accomplices, not to mention the attention he'd attract."

Costello reached over for his drink, took a long sip. He put down his glass and turned to look straight at Norma. "You know, the crews today ain't like our old-time prop boys. They are all crack men; specialists. They're reliable. They have to be. No two of these auditoriums are the same. It takes geniuses to hang the rigs. They're all trained riggers. They just double on ground props. I know their boss, Red Sawyer. Worked with him on the old Sparks show. No better man in the business. If he says there ain't no sabotage possible, I'd believe him. And he does."

Costello sighed, and spread his big hands. "So that's the situation, honey. I'd like to help you, but I don't know how I can. Don't look like there's anyone human mixed up in this. It's just Fate, that's all. Could be you're just havin' your accidents all in one bunch, instead of strung out. If so, it'll stop sooner or later. It's bound to. You may never have another one. Who knows? No earthly point in my hangin' around. I'd just be in your way. And I hate to go back on my word."

Then suddenly his eyes widened. He leaped to his feet, and flung the contents of his glass across the room, full into Norma Laform's face.

She sprang up, choking, gasping, pawing at her eyes as the liquor burned them. "You—you didn't have to resign *that* way, Bull," she moaned, pitifully.

"Don't be silly!" The big man was already elbowing past her. "Had to get you off that bed in a hurry, that's all! No time to speak —matter of split seconds. If you don't believe it, take a look at where you was layin' just now."

She looked, and froze, both hands at her throat. The huge oil painting was no longer hanging on the wall. It had fallen down and was lying across the top of the bed. It had made no sound, the pillows muffling it. Now it lay there, a hundred pounds of wood and metal and plaster, crushing deep into the mattress.

"My God!" Norma cried, after a moment. "If that had happened while I was asleep—"

"Exactly! You didn't even hear it when you were awake. It would have crushed your head in." He was on the desk phone, clicking it savagely. "Hey, you. Get the manager up here quick. I don't know if he's asleep but wake him up! A woman almost got killed in this room."

The hotel manager arrived in a bathrobe promptly and with a couple of wild-eyed underlings. He was most apologetic. "It's an old hotel," he said. "Goes back to the 'nineties. Paintings like these were the vogue then. We've been gradu-

ally weeding them out, since we took the place over. This was one of the last. It never occurred to anybody that they might be dangerous, just monstrosities. They've been hanging here for sixty years. None ever fell before. We assumed they were all screwed to the wall."

"Well, this one wasn't!" Costello was examining it minutely. "It was just hanging on a cord, and a darn old one, at that. Don't seem like it has been tampered with, though. Just worn through. But I'd say this lady has grounds for a damage suit, if she wants to press charges."

"Oh, let it go, Bull," Norma La-form said, wearily. "It's not their fault. Don't bother—"

She was sitting slumped on the bed's foot, staring down at the floor. She didn't look up until the others had departed, still apologizing, and carrying the heavy picture with them. When they were alone again, she raised a face that was like a mask, almost totally without expression.

"It's no use, Bull," she said, in a dead voice. "You were right. I was wrong. As long as it was happening in the show I could kid myself. But when it starts in my own hotel room there's no longer any doubt. I'm just doomed."

"Now you stop that, Norma," Costello said. "I'm not goin' to desert you now. I believe you need me and I'll be standin' by every minute, long as you need me. Any-

thing hurts you, it will have to get me first."

THE AUDITORIUM loomed black and deserted at this hour—all massive stone and concrete. Nothing less like a circus lot could possibly be imagined, for all the gaudy posters that had been stuck on it. Only one lone light burned at the entrance.

A night watchman let Costello in when he knocked, and showed his credentials, though obviously puzzled by a visitor at this time of night. Bull dragged himself wearily through an echoing concrete corridor to the central arena, and stood staring blankly at its emptiness and desolation.

A big modern auditorium after midnight is an eerie sight. It seems haunted by the ghosts of the departed crowds. To Mack Costello it seemed utterly alien. The three rings and the aerial riggings, so visible when the spotlights played on them, were vague outlines rising into invisibility. He couldn't even see Norma's trapeze. It was so high above the others that the faint night-lights didn't reach up to it.

Even when he puffed up the stone stairs to the balcony, and stood in its topmost tier it was still only a dim outline. He sank onto one of the hard wooden seats, and glared up at it in frustration. What on earth was he doing here, he wondered? But the

strange compulsion that had brought him here was still driving him. He had the overpowering feeling that there was something here, something vitally important, if he could only find it.

He dragged himself up, and resumed his seemingly aimless exploration of the great building. He explored it, corridor by corridor, and room by room. He didn't encounter anyone. Gradually he worked downward until he came to the basement where the larger animals were stabled. They were all in one corner of the vast block-long area, bedded uncomfortably on straw. The elephants, one lone white horse, a couple of ponies, a donkey and a llama.

He moved closer. Most of the animals were asleep or dozing. But elephants never seem to sleep very much. The two little ones that were lying down got to their feet hastily. The three older ones stretched out their trunks, and twittered a welcome. Costello stood fearlessly among them, talking to them, patting them, relaxing in their familiarity.

"Be careful, Señor," a voice spoke, out of the shadows. "Do not get too near them. One cannot always trust them."

The big man swung around, startled. And despite a lifetime spent among freaks and deformities, his jaw dropped. The shape advancing slowly out of a corner bore hardly any resemblance to a

human. It was a man bent almost double, who walked—or rather, dragged himself along—on a metal cane and a bullhook. Almost every bone in his lower body seemed to have been broken, crushed almost flat—giving him almost a two-dimensional appearance. His huge shoulders were bowed, like an ape's, and he shuffled with head down. But his face, when he raised it, was young and still handsome; and his smile was pleasant, with a flash of white teeth.

"No one is supposed to be in here, at this hour, Senor," he went on. "But it is all right. I can see you know your way around the beasts, and they like you. Still, it is best to take no chances. *I* found that out—to my cost!"

Mack Costello stared at him. He was both startled and sympathetic. "You're the Night Bull Man, huh? Yeah, you sure are bunged up, but not as badly as a handler on the Cristiani Circus I knew a few years ago. Elephant fell on him, and crushed his whole body. Miracle he lived. What happened to you? One of them stomp you? Not one of these, I hope."

Despite his state the other laughed almost gayly. "Oh, heavens, no, Senor! These are but youngsters. A nice peaceful herd. Otherwise I could not work around them. This happened long ago, in my native Mexico in Guadalajara. A big bull, a tuskèr. He knelt



on me five times, and threw me fifty feet, they say. I did not know, as I was unconscious. I did not even know when they shot him, and saved my life. I lay in the hospital for months and everyone thought I would die. But they had good doctors there. They pulled me through."

The man shrugged. "Did they do me a favor, Senor? I am no longer a man. I am—what you see. Perhaps it would have been kinder to have let me die."

"Oh, I don't know," Costello said, consolingly. "You could be a lot worse off. You're still alive, healthy, and able to work at your trade. Seems to me you got a lot to be thankful for."

"Oh, I am not complaining, Senor," the man assured him, hastily. "As you say, I am most

fortunate to be here at all. I am no longer a real Bull Man, of course. I cannot go in the ring, for no uniform could disguise my physical state. I never even go upstairs when the crowd is there. My appearance would upset people too much. I stay down here with the beasts.

"I do the menial work, stand the night watch while the others sleep, and drive the Bull Truck when we move. Seated in a cab I look normal. I seldom leave the basement, even my food is brought in. Now and then I go out and walk the streets, late at night, when no one will see me. That is my whole life. And yet—I am still a young man, with a young man's desires!"

"Tough, all right!" Costello said. "Still, you ain't much worse off than I'll be in a few more years. Life cripples us all, humans and animals, if we live long enough. It happened to you a little sooner, that's all!"

"Yes, I suppose you're right." The handler was silent for a moment. Then he said: "Tell me! You are the Senor Bull Costello, the great detective, who comes to help the poor Senorita Norma, the sky girl, in her troubles?"

As Costello stared, he laughed again. "Oh, you know how gossip travels on a circus, Senor! Even down here we have heard it. The whole troupe knows of your coming, and hopes that you can do

something to help our star. I have never even seen the Senorita—as I said, I cannot watch the show—but they tell me she is marvellous, and most beautiful. All who know her speak highly of her. It would be a tragedy if anything should happen to one like that.

"And besides, she is our main attraction. She is the one who draws the crowds. If you can help her we will all be in your debt. And you can count on us for any assistance. Though," he hesitated, looking puzzled, "I confess I do not see how anyone can. Accidents are accidents. They happen. I should know that, better than anyone else. They cannot even be foreseen in advance—much less prevented."

The big man looked down at him. "You think they're accidents, too?"

"But of course, Senor. What else?"

Costello squared his shoulders. "Well, there won't be any more of them, whatever they are. I'll see to that. There's one way it could have been done. I figured it out when I was wanderin' around up there. I noticed the cat-walks, runnin' clear around the top of the building. Is there any way a feller can get up to them?"

The handler frowned. "The cat-walks? Si, Senor. They are in every auditorium. They are necessary for its maintainance. The electricians use them, and those

who service the skylights, and the ventilation. Our property men use them, too, when they hang the aerial apparatus. There are stairways at each end of the building, leading up to them. There is one down there."

He pointed to a small archway down at the far end, where a dim light burned. "But it is a long climb, ten or more flights. I should strongly advise against your going up there, Senor, unless you are expert. It is most dangerous. They are just thin planks, with a wire guard-rail, very crude. One false step, and you would fall a hundred feet! And a man of your age, who might get dizzy. Do you really feel you have to walk around up there, Senor?"

"Oh, I ain't going to walk around," Costello assured him. "I'm going to camp up there every night from now on. I can see Miss Norma's riggin' plain from up there. It's hangin' only a few feet below. I ain't plannin' to take my eyes off it, for a second. Nothin' can happen to it, nobody can monkey with it, or even get near it without my seein' them. It will be absolutely safe from now on. I guarantee it."

Again the typical shrug. "Very well, Senor," the handler said. "I wish you luck! It will be nice to have another circus man in the building at night. And you will always find me here, if you need me. I will pray that you succeed."

He fingered the silver medal about his throat, then turned and shuffled slowly back toward his pallet in the corner.

Left alone, Mack Costello gave a last pat to the elephants, then strode toward the dim-lit archway at the basement's end. It took every ounce of his willpower to tackle the narrow stairs that mounted upward, flight after flight. But he gritted his teeth, and forced himself to climb. There were no lights, after the first few tiers, and he had to use his police flashlight, which threw eery shadows.

His footsteps rang hollowly on the rickety treads. He was winded by the time he'd dragged himself up the last of them, and opened a door at the top, which was unlocked. And there was the catwalk, stretching away into dimness.

It was crude—just unpainted planks, two or three feet wide, with a stretched steel cable and occasional uprights to serve as a makeshift rail. It looked almost as ethereal as a spiderweb. There was another one, he could make out faintly, running along the opposite wall. And between them was only empty space, an awesome drop to the arena below.

For a moment, Costello hesitated. Then he forced himself to step out. The contrivance vibrated sickeningly, beneath his weight, but it held. He kept on walking,

holding onto the rough cable with one hand, and lighting the way with his flashlight, his cane tucked under his arm. He began to look about him. The panorama below looked even less like a circus from such an angle, and height.

The rings were just red circles, the piles of props like children's toys, even the mounting riggings were almost invisible. The few faint night lights hardly carried up to him.

He reached the center of the cat-walk, and there was Norma Laform's rigging, hanging only slightly below him. The aluminum rectangle, the guy wires, the silver trapeze and spangled rope on which she performed were so close that he could almost touch them, plainly visible even in the faint light. He stood there for a moment, looking at them, studying them, playing his flashlight over a detail here and there.

Then, satisfied, he looked around, found a small wooden box that one of the electricians had been using, placed it in the center of the walk, and seated himself on it. He sat there, his chin resting on the cable, his eyes glued on the rig. He seemed to doze.

Time passed. The night wore on. It was very near to dawn. In the sleeping city outside, there were faint sounds of waking life around.

Gradually, as he sat, there loomed over him a gigantic shad-

ow, thrown by the lights below. And then the shadow moved, and seemed to swoop. There was one wild cry, and then the swirling blur of a body falling.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, when Norma Laform came down from her suite at the hotel, she found Mack Costello patiently waiting for her in the lobby. He was leaning on the desk, and chatting with the clerk. A very different Mack Costello, smiling, fresh-scrubbed, a flower in his lapel, and showing not a sign of having been up all night.

"Morning, honey," he said, sweeping off his hat with old-time circus courtliness. "You look as pretty as a picture. I reckon you got some sleep after all. That's why I didn't call you until only a half hour ago to tell you I'd have breakfast with you early this morning. I've got some important news to tell you about. Come on, I'll buy you some breakfast. There's plenty of time before your show."

Costello took her elbow, and steered her out of the lobby, and into a nearby coffee shop. "This place serves pretty good hot cakes. I've already eaten about a dozen of them, but I guess I can stand a few more."

After they were in a booth and he'd given the order, he leaned back and beamed. "Well, you can relax, honey. Your troubles are

all over. Case is all solved, and washed up. I'm headin' back for home today."

Norma stared at him open-mouthed, utterly bewildered.

"There's just one thing," Costello went on. "There's a little news I have to break to you. I don't know quite how to put it. You see, your husband's dead."

The silence seemed to last for long minutes. Norma stared at Costello, the shock of disbelief mirrored in her eyes. She finally found her voice. "But—but of course he's dead," she managed to say bewilderedly. "Everyone knows that. He has been for almost two years."

"Oh, no, he wasn't." Costello shook his head, firmly. "That's the point. He's been dead only a few hours. He was still alive last night when—"

Norma broke in, her voice choked with emotion, "But how could that be—Jan alive—here! What was he doing in America and near the show. Do you expect me to believe—"

"Honey, he was alive enough to durn near kill me—closest call I've ever had. He's been on this same show with you, all along, hidin' down in the basement, disguised as a bull hand. He's the one been causin' all your accidents —tryin' to break your nerve, make you fall, like he done. Nice feller! You can sure pick 'em, Norma. And don't feel sorry for

him either. He's been tryin' to murder you."

Costello stopped talking as he saw the waitress approach with the hot cakes. He glanced at Norma's agonized face, and when the waitress walked away, he went on: "You never saw him. He didn't come upstairs, while the show was on account of his condition: But even if you'd happened to meet, face to face, you wouldn't have known him. He'd had surgery done on his face, right after the time of his accident. I saw photos of the great Jan Varchek when he was over here. He didn't look a bit like them."

"And of course he was pretending to be a Mexican. Swell disguise; easiest way for a foreigner, with a slight accent, to cover it is to pose as another kind of foreigner, one everybody's familiar with. Every circus in this country has Mexicans on it. No one notices them, and they don't talk alike. There are a dozen different accents, depending on the provinces they come from. Most anything will get by as long as you throw in a few "Senors"—and shrug your shoulders."

"The only place where a man as crippled as he was wouldn't attract no attention would be around a bull line. Elephants got the sweetest dispositions of all animals, but they're awful big. If one runs amok, he can sure smash up a man. And a feller who's been

hurt that way can always get a job around a herd. Any superintendent will hire him out of sympathy, whether he needs him or not. And since he couldn't do a regular handler's work, just odd jobs, his ignorance of the beasts wouldn't show.

"Oh, he was covered up good. Even puzzled me for a few minutes. But you see, I'd already deduced he was there. I'd come back to the building looking for him." Costello paused, and looked at her. "The same thing that convinced you that it was Fate that was after you, and not anything human, convinced me that it was human and had to be. Until then, I'd thought you was just imagin' things.

"And accidents in circus arenas don't mean too much. They're dangerous places. But in a peaceful hotel room, that's something else again. It was just too coincidental. I was sure somebody had staged it, even though I couldn't find no traces of it. And if that one was staged, it meant the others probably were too.

"And from our conversation earlier, I realized that there was one person who'd have an awful good motive for knockin' you off, if he was still around and it was that Polish ex-husband of yours! You thought he was dead, but you couldn't be sure. All you had was information from an Iron Curtain country, and that's durn unreli-

able, as anybody can tell you. Oh, he'd had the fall, all right. Even our newspapers carried the story. I even remember reading about it in the *Billboard*.

"He was smashed up, his career ended. But dead—no, that didn't necessarily follow. Maybe he'd been somebody real important, maybe on a mission here that only he could carry out. In that case, they might have just given out he was killed, then got a plastic surgeon to patch him up and smuggled him back so's he could carry it out.

"But he might have had somethin' he wanted to do first. A feller like you'd described, arrogant, conceited—he wouldn't blame himself for what had happened to him. He'd blame you. Way he'd figure things, if you hadn't walked out on him, it wouldn't have happened. He might well want to get back at you, and make you suffer like he had."

"He was so wrong though, Bull," Norma said.

"Yes, I know. But it was a possibility, and worth checkin' on. *Someone* had fixed that picture in your hotel room, that was sure and it would have got you, but for me. I knew that I had to work fast, or he'd pick you off right under my nose. So I dragged back to that durn big auditorium, tired as I was, and started goin' over it with a fine-tooth comb.

"It had to be somebody on the

outfit I hadn't met yet. And then, down in the basement, I come on the Mexican bull hand, worst crippled-up feller I ever seen, with a story about bein' trampled by a mad tusker in Guaadalajara. The minute I laid eyes on him I knowed he was my man. Stood to reason there couldn't be *two* like that on a show as small as this one.

"And even though I suspected him, what could I do about it? I couldn't go to the local cops with a story like that. They'd have thrown me in the psycho ward. So I thought fast, an' come up with a scheme I was sure would make him betray himself, if he was Jan Valchek. I spun him a yarn about settin' up on the building cat-walks every night, and guardin' your rig."

Costello guffawed suddenly, slapping his leg. "Some method of crime detection—that was. If any of my police friends had heard me, they'd sure have thought I was gettin' senile. Why, I could have sat up there until Domesday, and never learned a thing. Maybe Jan thought I was crazy, but he had to believe me. He'd seen me doin' it. And the point was, it would put *him* out of business. With me up there, only a few feet from the rig, he couldn't possibly get near it again or damage it. He couldn't even walk in the Arena below, and tamper with the ground guys, without my seein' him. His only



chance would be to knock me off, too, before I could tell anybody what I was doin'. And if I was found dead in the morning they'd just think I climbed up there by myself, and fell off by accident.

Norma Laform smiled up at the big man. "And that's just what everybody would have thought," she said.

Costello grinned at her. "That's exactly how I'd hoped he'd figure it, honey. And sure enough, I hadn't been up there more than a

couple of hours before he sneaked up to do me in. I saw him comin', but I didn't let on. I pretended I was dozin'. He could walk without his canes when he wanted to. He walked on all fours like an ape, absolutely silent. It was kind of scary watchin' him steal along in the shadows.

"I let him get right up behind me. I wasn't too worried. I figured, him bein' a cripple, I could handle him. But there sure wasn't nothin' crippled about his hands and arms. He had the strength of a gorilla. That's how he'd been able to get at your rigging, honey; swingin' out on the rafters from the cat-walks, and then droppin' down on it. Height didn't bother him, you said that yourself. And he had all night to do it in. He didn't need a light; he could work by touch. He knew every inch of that rigging. You'd performed with him on it together. I believe, when he'd tortured you enough, he'd have fixed the whole thing so it would drop, and finish you."

Norma shuddered, and a low gasp escaped her.

"However, when he jumped me, and grabbed me by the throat with them hands, I sure thought I was a goner," Costello continued. "Everything started to go black. But I had my cane handle hooked around an upright and he couldn't push me off. And I know Judo—a Japanese acrobat taught it to me twenty years before our

American cops started usin' it.

"I gave one desperate twist, an' seen him fall past me. He let out a scream, as he went down. That was all. He kind of flew apart when he hit—darnedest thing. That's why you won't even be bothered to identify him. Not much to identify."

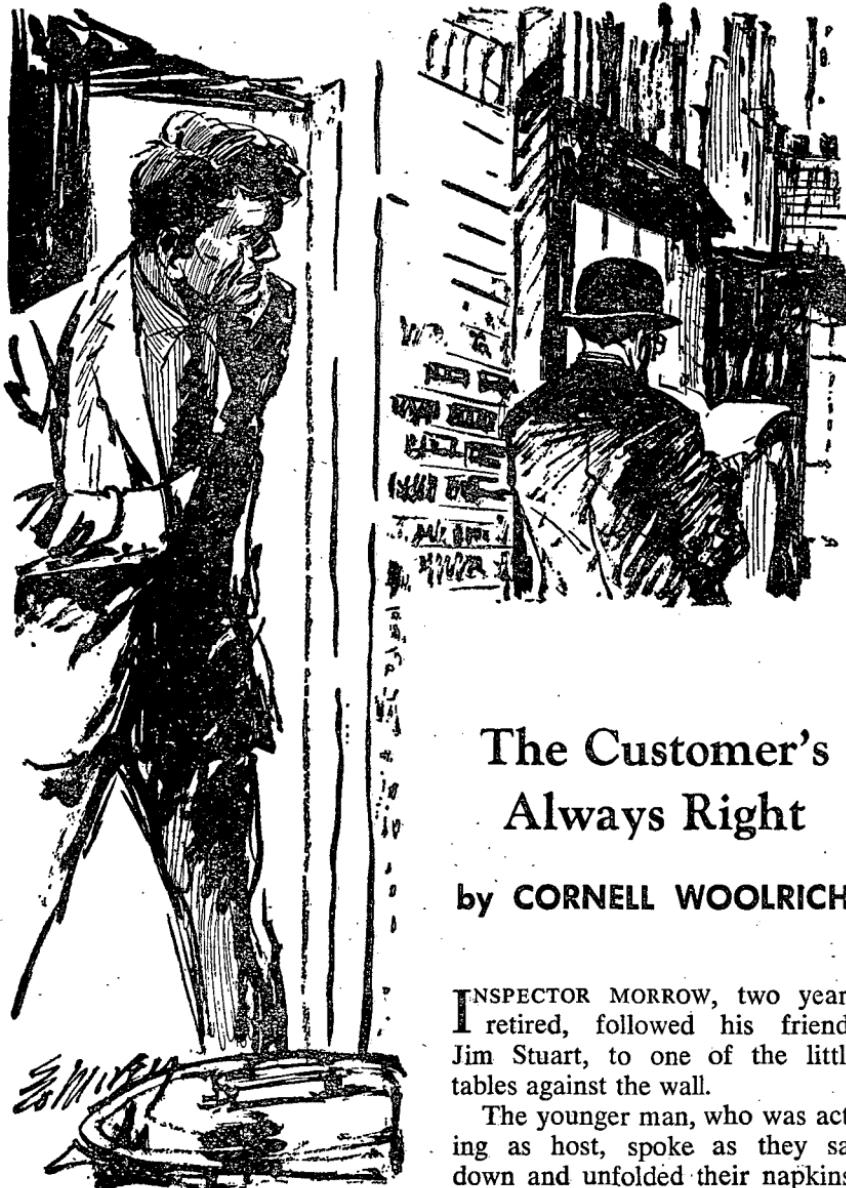
Costello leaned back, and beamed at Norma. "And that's the whole story, honey. It's all over, and done with. You're safe now, your worries are over. You can live your life and be happy."

Norma was regarding him intently. "You planned to kill him, all along, didn't you?" she said softly. "You never intended anything else."

His eyes were suddenly like china marbles. "Durn right, I didn't," he growled, like an old bear. "I wasn't takin' no chances. Feller like that, in his state, he'd have got a lot of sympathy. And we got some funny laws about aliens in this country. He probably would have been deported. And of course, he'd have come back and started the whole thing over again. No sirree! He had to fall.

"You know," he said, confidentially, gesticulating with a forkfull of pancake, "the thing I'm happiest about is gettin' that feller out of that bull herd. A feller like that, a real mean one, has no business workin' around elephants. Why, you can't tell, he might have done somethin' to one of them."

A Very Powerful Story—by a Very Great Writer.



The Customer's Always Right

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

INSPECTOR MORROW, two years retired, followed his friend, Jim Stuart, to one of the little tables against the wall.

The younger man, who was acting as host, spoke as they sat down and unfolded their napkins.

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"This place is famous for its food," Stuart said. "Ever been here before?"

Morrow looked around him uncertainly. "*Restaurant Robert*," he murmured. "Wait a minute, Jim. Sure, I remember this place! Before my retirement from Homicide. We once traced a murderer here—and then we lost him. I'll tell you about it after we've ordered.

Morrow took up his menu and studied it a moment or two in silence. Then he shrugged. "You come here a lot, I imagine. What's good?"

"Try one of Robert's famous rabbit stews," Stuart advised. "They're made separately for each customer, in individual, earthenware casseroles. It's Robert's own special recipe. He won't share it with anyone."

"Sounds good enough to me," Morrow said.

"Two," said Stuart to the waiter. "And tell Robert I have a new customer with me tonight. He turned to Morrow. "That'll bring him out in person at the end of the meal, to hear you praise his culinary skill. He's as proud as a kid of these rabbit stews of his."

Stuart leaned back comfortably in his chair. "It'll take a little while. Now—what about that story you promised to tell me. You say it was a case that you never managed to bring to a successful conclusion?"

"That's right." Morrow helped himself to a piece of bread. "It's a good five or six years ago now. We found a man—murdered one night . . ."

INSPECTOR MORROW—five years younger, five inches slimmer at the waist—climbed down the rickety iron steps into the basement antique shop. A tall, broad-shouldered young man came toward the entrance. "Hello, Inspector."

"Hello, Fletcher. What's the good word so far?"

"Well, I've finished the preliminaries," Morrow's subordinate said. "Weylin Hamilton's his name. He lived here alone on the premises, in back of the shop. It happened early last evening. There's no doubt that robbery was the motive. He evidently kept considerable money down here with him. We found the box he'd hidden it in broken open. No relatives or next of kin."

The place was more grotesque within than it had looked from the outside. Technically it might have been an antique shop, but to Morrow's practical eye it looked more like a junk shop, and he thought it contained just about everything a person would *not* want.

A suit of Japanese armor loomed in one corner and scimitars, spears, and venerable flint-lock pistols were affixed to the

walls. There were squat Chinese Buddhas, a South Sea war-drum, and even a Turkish water-pipe coiled on a tabouret.

"Look out, that's him!" Fletcher warned abruptly as Morrow was about to thrust his way between a couple of the overcrowded display cases. Inspector Morrow stopped, barely managing to avoid stepping on the huddled, inert bundle on the floor.

Morrow gestured impatiently. "Move some of this trash out of the way will you? I'll need more room." He crouched, peering attentively down at the still form lying there. "Now, let's see what we've got."

The handle of an antique Florentine dagger, wrapped in felt, protruded from the slain man's chest.

"That came down off the wall over there," Fletcher pointed out. "We found the place where it belongs."

"Then quite obviously it wasn't premeditated. The burglar didn't bring his own weapon with him. Hamilton came out of the back room, interrupted the guy trying to rob him and the guy let him have it with the first thing he could lay his hands on." Morrow pointed. "What's this cotton-wool wrapped around his instep?"

"The M.E. says he was suffering with arthritis. He couldn't put one shoe on. Couldn't even move around much, the last few weeks."

"Then it's a cinch he couldn't manage those breakneck iron steps leading up to the sidewalk. He must have been sort of marooned down here." Morrow rose. "Let's see the box you think he kept his money in."

"I know he did. Here's a tiny corner of a bill that got caught under the back of the lid, torn off in the murderer's hurry to get it out. I guess the old guy had his dough wadded in pretty tightly."

Morrow eyed the tiny fragment of paper first. "Government paper," he said. "You can see the blue and red threads."

He examined the box itself. It was of Oriental, origin—lacquered wood on the outside, and with a thin sheeting of copper lining the inside. The lacquer was marred, as if it had been gouged all along the seam of the lid.

"He had a tough time opening this, even though it has no lock and key," Morrow said. "It operates by pressure; there's an unnoticeable sort of bulge in the wood. You press against that to release the lid. Apparently, the killer didn't get the hang of that, and must have kept digging his nail into the seam, trying to pry it up."

"He brought the box closer to a portable reflector that had been rigged up, and studied the lining intently. It shot up when he least expected it and his finger rammed home. He hurt himself on it, too."

Morrow grunted with annoy-

ance, then resumed his examination of the box. "There's a thin, dark hair-line across the edge of the metal lining, where it protrudes above the edge of the wood casing—blood." Morrow considered this a moment. "Just where did you find the box?"

Fletcher showed him.

Morrow got down on his hands and knees and began to scan the floor. "Yes, there's a drop or two here." He motioned to his assistant. "Give me a piece of paper, any kind will do." He scooped at something on the floor, brought it up. "See what this is?"

Fletcher squinted at the small, shell-like object. "It looks like somebody's fingernail," he said.

"It's the whole nail. It must have been infected to start with, to come off that easily. The metal edge of that box-lining must have caught under it, and sliced it off. Or if it didn't come off immediately, the killer pulled it off himself to keep it from dangling."

Morrow tightened his lips.

"That was his mistake. It will take too long to grow a new nail for him to be able to cover up the loss before we've caught him."

Morrow wrapped and pocketed the queasy little memento. He went on: "It was somebody that paid two or more visits. He knew just which box contained the old man's cash, and made a bee-line for it without disturbing anything else. Hamilton must have been in-

cautious enough to haul it out once or twice in his presence."

"That looks as if Hamilton paid *him* instead of him paying Hamilton for something he bought," Fletcher said.

"Let's take a look at that inside room," Morrow said. "I haven't seen it yet."

It was just a cubbyhole containing a cot and cupboard and very little else. Morrow glanced around with eyes trained not to miss little details. He opened the cupboards, revealed several bottles of liniment, but nothing more. He turned to Fletcher

"All right. The M.E. says he was suffering from arthritis lately, and couldn't navigate the entrance-steps. You say he had no relatives or intimate friends. Where'd he get his meals then? There's not so much as an empty cracker-box."

Fletcher scratched his head. "I never thought of that!"

"He had stuff sent in," Morrow said. "That must be it: From someplace nearby where he'd been in the habit of going frequently—before his illness. That means we look for a waiter or busboy. That's who killed him. It checks: Repeated visits with a covered tray or hamper; Hamilton taking money out of the box to pay."

"Now we're getting somewhere. We want a waiter or busboy with one fingernail missing—an employee of a restaurant who works



someplace within a radius of about three or four blocks!"

ANDY GOULET, the junior waiter at Robert's, was nervous. He stood in the kitchen with his back to the boss, while the latter cut up the skinned rabbits that went piecemeal into his famous dishes, six of which were already simmering on the charcoal-stove. There were always that many calls for them at least, often more.

Robert, a huge, good-natured Frenchman, bald as an onion under his chef's cap was rambling on, a habit of his whenever there was anyone in the kitchen to listen.

"Funny thing happen this afternoon," he said. "Some guy come to my door upstairs here in house, before restaurant is open, and say

he want to speak to me. I think he's detective."

Andy stopped trimming radishes, and listened intently, head up, the knife held motionless in one white-gloved hand.

"He looked at me close, like owl," Robert went on. "He say, 'You happen to notice which one of your waiters got sore finger?' Robert shrugged. "I say, 'How I'm going to tell you that? The one strict rule in my place is, all the men work for me they got to wear white cotton gloves, keep on their hands all the time, for to be clean.'"

Andy listened, neck rigid.

"He say, 'Never mind, I find out for myself. Keep it under your hat, eh?'" Robert gestured toward the dining room door. "He's out there now. I see him when I come through. What you suppose is matter, eh?"

"I don't know," Andy said.

Robert wiped his hands on his apron. "All right, the ragouts are all ready now, I just have to put seasoning in. I go down basement and bring up little spice. Keep eye on fire for me, Andy. If she gets too low, put on little more charcoal."

He opened the cellar door that led down to the supply room, and waddled clumsily out of sight down the steps.

Andy swallowed hard, as though he had a lump in his throat. He turned and eyed the

glowing charcoal-range. He went over to the sack of fuel in a corner, carried it to the stove, crouched down and spaded some in. He was alone in the kitchen at the moment, and such movements were likely to be few and far-between as the dinner hour got under way.

He unpinned something from the inside of his shirt. With furtive, trembling, white-gloved fingers he tore it across once, twice. He flung the pieces on the flame-licked charcoal. One fragment escaped him in the draught, fell to the floor, and lay there for a moment.

The numeral "20" was engraved on it, in green and white, with red and blue threads veining the paper. Andy retrieved it, and tossed it in after the other pieces. Then he closed the stove-flap.

He jumped furtively back to the work-table just as the door opened and one of the other waiters entered. The latter loaded a tray without glancing at Andy, hoisted it to his shoulder, and swung out again into the dining room.

Andy went after him—as far as the dör. He steadied it with one hand, and peered cautiously through the glass inset. There was a fair crowd already in the outer room. Most of them were habitues; he recognized most of the faces. But there was one man sitting alone at a table near the far wall whom Andy was sure had

never been in the place before. He didn't act hungry and he was ignoring the menu.

A waiter came over to take his order, and the man said something to him. The waiter looked surprised, hesitated momentarily. The man repeated what he had said in a tight-lipped way that brooked no argument.

Andy saw the waiter strip off one glove, then the other and poise his hands for inspection, palms down. The man nodded curtly and the waiter drew on his gloves again, looking at him queerly.

Andy didn't wait to see any more. He left the door-pane, fled swiftly across the kitchen toward the opposite door that opened to the outside alley, stripping off his apron as he went. He pushed through, then dug with his heels and drew up short.

The motionless figure of a man was outlined at the alley-mouth against the street light beyond. He was just standing there waiting, effectively blocking all egress. There was no way out but past him. In the other direction the alley came to a dead end.

Andy turned, floundered back into the kitchen. He looked around with agonized helplessness. Robert's slow, heavy tread sounded on the basement steps.

He had a moment left.

He was standing there, bent forward over the work-table, face

ghastly white, when Robert lumbered into sight a minute later. Robert gave him a sudden, startled look.

"What's matter, you sick? You got pain in stomach?"

"Boss, you'll have to let me go home for tonight," Andy whispered weakly. "I can't —work any more." He rubbed a damp cloth along the edge of the table with one hand, leaning weakly above it as he did so.

Another waiter came barging in. "One rabbit stew for the rich dame at number four table."

Robert was a considerate boss. "All right Andy, you go," he said. "You no look good, that's a fact. You take over his tables for him tonight, George."

Andy's face was still deathly-pale, but calm and untroubled now. He tottered out to the ally-mouth a moment later.

The man standing there promptly reached out. "Just a minute brother, let's have a look at your hands."

Andy obeyed without demur. He held them out, shakily but acquiescently, palms downward. They were ungloved. The index finger of the right hand was a top-heavy funnel of telescoped bandage.

"Take off the bandage," the man said.

Andy didn't have to. He just gave his hand a slight downward hitch and the dressing fell off its

own weight. There was nothing to hold it, nothing under it—just a space between thumb and middle finger.

JIM STUART turned to Inspector Morrow. "It was him, all right, eh?" he asked.

"Sure it was him." Morrow scowled. "But knowing you've got your man is one thing, proving it quite another. The way it turned out, we had no supporting evidence. The finger was our only evidence, our *whole* evidence. He'd worn his white service-gloves when he'd carried the tray over, so that did away with all hope of prints. The pair of gloves that the box had slashed he'd destroyed.

"He admitted he'd taken quite a few meals over to Hamilton, but so had all the others—they'd taken turns delivering trays of food. Hamilton had been seen alive after Andy had called for and removed the tray that last night. So the thing was, which of them had sneaked back after the tray had been taken?

"Andy had a cast-iron alibi, of course. We *had* to have that finger, on him or off him didn't matter. I raised holy hell with them when they brought him in to me. 'You numbskulls, get that finger! I hollered. 'That's almost more important than he is!'

"We went right back to the place, all of us. Inside of ten min-

utes we were on the job turning the premises inside out. We put out the fire then and there, raked through the half-burned charcoal. We stopped the garbage before it had had a chance to go out, went through it with a fine-toothed comb. We emptied out all the flour bins, and containers and what not they had around. We made a wreck out of that place—but the finger never turned up.

"Andy claimed it was an accident, of course. The knife had slipped and taken the finger clean off. He claimed he was in too much pain to notice where it went.

"We grilled him for days after that, but it didn't do any good. We never found the money on him, nor any evidence that he'd spent it. We couldn't shake his alibi for the particular time the crime had taken place. He'd outsmarted us. Sure, we knew he was the guy. We were convinced of it. But without the nail-less finger we couldn't prove it. We had to let him go.

"It still burns me up, even to this day, to think of it. It spoiled what would have otherwise been a perfect record for me. I still can't figure out what became of that damned finger, what he did to make it disappear so fast."

"Here comes Robert to find out how you like his specialty," Jim Stuart said.

"The rabbit stew was great," Morrow complimented the old chef. "I never tasted anything to beat it."

"You like, eh?" Robert's chest puffed out like a pouter pigeon's. "I never had a complaint yet, in over twenty years—" He corrected himself conscientiously: "Just once, I remember now. One night fussy rich lady, who used to come regular, she send for me. This was just couple years ago, we have a little trouble in kitchen that night. I get maybe a little excited.

"She say, 'Robert, are you sure that was *all* rabbit? I may be a little wrong, but the flavor at times seemed to vary a little.' "

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by VERA CASPARY

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THE PRICE OF A DOLLAR

The barside scoop of fast bucks seemed safe enough. How was Slot-Machine to know one small bill had a big death-head on it?

by DENNIS LYNDS

IT WAS a bad time for Slot-Machine Kelly. Until yesterday Joe Harris had been out of work for over a month and, besides, Slot had been separated from a job himself for all of six weeks. So when he saw the money lying loose and abandoned on the bar, he moved his hand fast enough to catch a fly, swept up the money unseen by the bartender or the six men at the bar. He sauntered slowly out of the La Bomba Club.

After he reached the darkness of Eighth Avenue, he made a wide circle in the night to an alley he knew, shoved the loot behind a loose brick without even looking at it, and then went for a swim at the McBurney YMCA.

They liked him at the YMCA. He was an example to others what you could do even with one arm. He had learned to swim pretty well with his one arm, and tonight he swam around for about an hour, played a little fast handball for another half hour, dressed slowly, and went to pick up the money.

He carried it to his office, sure no one had seen him or was after him. He switched on the light with the door switch, crossed the two-bit office above Twenty-Eighth Street, and sat down at his battered desk to count the take. There were two fives and three singles.

Disgusted, he shoved the bills

© 1963, by Dennis Lynds

A NEW "SLOT-MACHINE" KELLY STORY



back into his pocket. The La Bomba was a call-girl hangout, and the big blonde dame who'd left the money lying loose, while she plied her trade out among the tables had looked like at least a hundred-a-night. Still, thirteen bucks was thirteen more than Slot had right now, and at least he would not have to drink any of Joe Harris' rotgut booze. He was already tasting the fine clean bite of good Irish whisky when the man slid into the office.

He did not actually see the man. He saw a hand reach for his light switch, and he had a brief glimpse of a face, and then the office was dark. He moved two quick steps away from his chair and froze. That brief glimpse had turned him to ice.

The face was Oriental, he was sure of that, and it looked like Packy Chen. The Chinese giant was the only Chinese hood on the East Coast, and as far as anyone knew he was an expert in broken arms. That alone made him one of Mike Booher's best boys.

"Throw your money on the desk, mister! All of it."

The voice was muffled, as if talking through a cloth. If it was Packy Chen he didn't want Slot to know it. That was strange, because the big Chinese knew Slot and knew Slot would give him just about anything he wanted. And what was Packy Chen doing on a holdup job?

"Don't try to think, one-arm," the muffled voice warned.

Slot moved very softly to his left until he was against the wall, with the window directly across the room. He made it just in time. A giant shadow crossed the lighter square of the window, and he felt the edge of a hand across his nose, hard.

He felt his nose break. He wasn't worried about his looks. His nose had been broken a few times in the past, and before the dark figure could hit again, Slot caught the hand and threw the man across the room. There was a crash of chairs and bookcases.

He did not wait to see where the attacker had landed. He felt no call to battle. Without hesitating for a split second he ran out the door. He was two flights down and picking up speed by the time he heard feet pounding above him down the stairs. In the friendly dark of the street, Slot faded into a doorway hidden behind a thick wire gate that only he knew was there. He saw the attacker run out and stop.

The man was in shadow, but it still looked like Packy Chen. He was a giant all right, and the face was definitely Oriental. Slot watched him shrug his shoulders and turn back into the office building. He would probably do a wrecking job, but Slot had nothing in his office the Salvation Army would even take, so it didn't both-

er him. His nose did. It was bleeding and it hurt now. In a few hours he would have two lovely black eyes. He headed for Doc Moriarty.

After Moriarty had patched him up, he went to the tavern where Joe Harris had just started working. Joe took one look at him and glanced toward his new boss.

"I don't know you," Joe said.

"Make it Irish," Slot said, "I'm a wounded man." And he told Joe about Packy Chen—if it had been Packy. He did not tell about the thirteen dollars. You could carry friendship too far.

"Packy Chen is mean," Joe said. "Mike Booher is worse."

"I didn't do anything," Slot protested.

"Chen don't work for nothin'," Joe said. "Tell Gazzo."

"I don't run to the cops," Slot said, "especially not to Captain Gazzo. He ain't friendly, you know?"

"Packy Chen ain't a buddy exactly," Joe said. "Come on. what you been up to?"

Slot sighed, leaned his one arm on the bar, and told Joe about the thirteen dollars.

"Thirteen bucks? Slot-Machine Kelly, the one-armed bandit. The one-armed penny ante boy," Joe said. "You tryin' to tell me Packy Chen would go after a guy for thirteen bucks?"

"It don't figure, does it," Slot said. "Only I'm sure it was Chen."

II

AND THEN THE cops found Slot. It was not Captain Gazzo. Gazzo was Homicide, and the cop that walked into the tavern and straight up to Slot was Lieutenant Mathews of the waterfront precinct. Mathews even liked Slot-Machine a little. The Lieutenant looked at Slot's nose.

"That's a pretty nose, Kelly," Mathews said. "Packy Chen hits hard."

"He don't run so fast," Slot said. "How'd you know it was Packy? In fact, how'd you know I got hit?"

"Doc Moriarty talks sometimes, if you ask nice," Mathews said.

"And you asked?"

"I asked," the Lieutenant said.

"How come?" Slot said. "Anyway, Doc didn't know it was Chen."

"I knew it was Chen, Kelly," Mathews explained. "Doc just told me it was you. Seems I had an epidemic tonight. Six muggings in the streets, three of them claiming it was a big Chinese guy that laid it on them. So I called all the neighborhood Docs, routine check, and found you. You want to tell me about it?"

"He walked in, he wanted money," Slot said. "I didn't stay around to ask why. And I ain't sure it was Packy. I didn't get a clear look at him."

Mathews was not convinced. "You don't know why?"

"Not a whisper," Slot said.

"He'll be back after you," Mathews said.

"I'll keep off dark streets."

"You do that," Mathews said.

"You don't know why, eh? Now that's really funny, because that's part of my epidemic. None of the victims knows why. They all got the arm. Some went out, some didn't, but nothing was taken from any of them."

"Nothing?" Slot said.

"They were frisked, their dough taken, and put back," Mathews said. "They all said the same thing. And one more thing, Kelly. Were you in the La Bomba Club tonight? Left maybe about nine o'clock?"

Slot raised his drink and drank slowly so that he would not show his surprise. It had been just ten minutes after nine when he left the La Bomba with the thirteen dollars. He put down his glass.

"Me in that clip joint?" he said. "Never, Lieutenant."

"Well, you're the only one then," Mathews said. "All six of my sleeping beauties had been at the La Bomba bar. They all left about nine, and they all got mugged about fifteen minutes to an hour or so later. I figure Chen didn't do it all. There must have been other boys. It could be coincidence, but I don't think so."

"Life is strange," Slot-Machine said.

"Yeh, well, if you remember anything, call me. And try to do it

before Packy Chen finds you. I want you able to talk."

"It was all a mistake, Lieutenant," Joe said.

Mathews shrugged. "Let's hope it was Packy who made the mistake."

Slot hoped it was Packy Chen who had made the mistake. He watched the Lieutenant leave with a certain regret. The big Chinese strong boy did not make mistakes, and that had to mean that for some reason Mike Booher thought that he, Slot, had something Mike wanted. Booher was the number one big man in just about everything dirty and illegal in New York—dope, white slaving, protection, the docks, you name it. If he put the finger on you it was curtains.

The only people who gave Mike Booher orders were somewhere overseas, probably in Naples. The only man who gave Packy Chen orders was Mike Booher. So Mike wanted something. The question was: What did Mike want that Slot had, and how badly did Booher want it?

"Packy Chen ain't after thirteen bucks," Joe said, "even if he did lose his shirt in Max Waller's poker game last week."

"No," Slot said. He tried to think. Nothing else had happened in the La Bomba. Two drinks, the eye for a couple of dames, casing the six men at the bar for a possible touch or easy mark, but—Six men!

"How many guys got worked over did Mathews say?" Slot said.
"Six."

"There was exactly six other guys in La Bomba around nine," Slot-Machine said.

"So Mike Booher thinks one of seven guys has something," Joe said. "It's probably one of the other guys."

"Maybe," Slot said, "but from the sound of it I was about the last on the list. If he'd found what they was after before he got to me, he wouldn't have come."

Slot-Machine became thoughtful. He reached into his pocket, took out the thirteen dollars, and spread the two fives and the three ones out on the bar. He studied them for a long time, and then he shrugged.

"I don't see nothin'," Slot said.
"How about you, Joe?"

Joe looked at each bill. The bartender began to shake his head, and then he stared at one bill. Joe picked up that bill. It was one of the singles. A plain dollar bill. Joe stared at it.

"I'll be damned," Joe said, "this is a funny one, Slot."

"What's funny?"

"The seal," Joe said. "It's gold. I didn't notice it at first. Who looks at the seal on a bill. Only this one's gold. I ain't seen a bill like that for fifteen, seventeen years. I figured there wasn't any around."

"So what's so big about a gold seal?" Slot said.

Joe explained. "It was the war. I mean, regular dollars got blue seals, fives and tens and higher denominations blue or red or green seals. I learned to keep my eyes peeled for things like that to keep from getting stuck with counterfeits."

"Get to the point."

Joe Harris laughed. "If you'd really lost that wing in the war, like you tell everyone, you'd know. Gold seals was on the bills they printed for using overseas in the war. They was special."

"They never used them back here?"

"I think it was illegal," Joe said.
"They got pulled in."

"This one didn't," Slot said, picking up the bill.

"That one didn't," Joe said.

Slot said, "Okay, Joe, I'll see you, I hope."

"Where you going?"

"To give thirteen dollars to Mike Booher, if that's what he wants. He can have it all."

"My hero," Joe said.

"Better chicken than cold turkey," Slot said:

III

SLOT CAUGHT A taxi to ride up-town to Mike Booher's place above an elegant restaurant on Ninth Avenue. Booher liked a good front, which tied in with the way he liked to eat. As Slot got into the cab he was sure he saw a large figure run



from a doorway and get into a waiting car. It looked a lot like Packy Chen. Slot sweated all the way to Mike Booher's place.

When he reached the restaurant there was no one behind him. He told Lou Gotz on the private door he wanted to see Mike Booher. Gotz checked by phone, and thumbed Slot to follow him. When he reached Booher's private of-

fice, Mike did not wait for a formal greeting.

"Listen, cripple, Mathews was here ahead of you. Now you tell me about Packy Chen. Talk fast, Kelly!"

Slot told all he knew, but he did not mention the thirteen dollars to Booher either. There was something peculiar about Mike's anger. Slot had feared that almost anything in the threat line might be used to get the money out of him, but he had not expected outraged anger.

"So you don't even know if it was Packy?" Booher said.

"I ain't sure," Slot admitted. "Mathews thinks it was Chen."

Booher exploded. "Every time a Chink does a strong arm in this town you all blame Packy! And everyone knows that Packy Chen only does what Mike Booher orders. How do you think that makes me look? I got enough trouble, Kelly, without you lying about me."

"You didn't order Packy to work me over?" Slot said.

"You? What the hell is a small-time cripple like you to me? If I ordered Chen to get you, Kelly, you'd be dead or a bloody mess by now. You know that, don't you?"

Slot nodded, "You got a point, Booher."

It was true. If Packy Chen had been on a job for Booher, he, Slot, would have been handled neat and clean. And when did Mike Booher

ever send just one man to do a job?

"Listen, Kelly, I got enough problems. Okay? Now I'm gonna tell you something I told Mathews, just to shut you up. Chen's been in Chicago for a week. I sent him. He ain't even in town. You got that?"

"Packy's in Chicago?"

"I said he was in Chicago," Booher said. "He's due back any minute. I had Lou there call him. Right Lou?"

"Right," Lou Gotz said. "I called Packy. He's flyin' back. Ought to be here by now."

"Okay, we'll wait. Right, Kelly?" Booher said.

"You are right," Slot said. You did not disagree with Mike Booher.

While he sat waiting, and sweating, Slot-Machine tried to puzzle it out. The attacker had looked enough like Packy Chen to have been Chen's twin brother. So who was impersonating Packy? Slot did not have a guess. But it explained the turned-out light, the muffled voice, and the fact that he was still walking around. Packy Chen did not make mistakes. So it had to be someone else. And that someone was after him.

Chen arrived about a half hour later. The big Chinese hood stared at Slot when Mike Booher explained the charge against him. Chen did not smile. Packy Chen never smiled. The Oriental muscleman only stared at Slot.

"You look too good for a guy I

worked over, one-arm," Chen said. "Tell me, why would I bother with a bum like you?"

"You know, that's what I'm wondering, Packy," Slot said. Because once again he was not sure. The big Chinese looked too much like his attacker, and the voice was very much the same.

"You're funny, ain't you Kelly? I do what Mike says, no more. You got that?" Chen was very annoyed. Maybe too annoyed.

"I got it, Packy."

"Mr. Chen to you, cripple," Chen said.

"Of course, Mr. Chen," Slot said. Only he noticed that Chen seemed to be favoring his right arm as if someone had thrown Chen across a room by that arm.

"Get out of here, Kelly," Mike Booher said.

Slot left. He went home to sleep. Joe was already snoring, it was that late. But Slot lay awake quite a while trying to figure it out. He had a hunch about that dollar.

After breakfast next day, Slot grabbed a taxi to the La Bomba Club. Again he was sure someone was following him. And again it looked just like Chen.

When he walked into the La Bomba Club he was not alone. Captain Gazzo turned to look at him as he came in. Slot stopped in his tracks. The Captain had four of his best men with him. Sergeant Jonas saw Slot-Machine and began to grin.

"Well, well, my old pal the one-armed bandit," Jonas said. "Can we help you with something special, Kelly?"

"My mistake," Slot said, "I thought this was the library. See you around."

Slot spun on his heel and started for the door. He did not hear the five cops move. Then he heard Gazzo's voice. The Captain sounded tired.

"All right, Kelly, how come you come walkin' in here at ten in the morning? The dancin' don't start for a long time, Kelly."

"I was lookin' for a friend," Slot said.

"You ain't got a friend," Sergeant Jonas said.

"That's why I'm lookin' for one. Maybe you'll be my friend, Jonas?"

Captain Gazzo said, "This friend, would he be alive or dead, Kelly?"

"You know somethin' I don't, Cap'n?" Slot said.

"I got a very stiff friend of someone's," Gazzo said.

"I just remembered I got to visit my dentist," Slot said. "He's in Miami. See you boys again soon, heah?"

Jonas said, "The owner there says you was in here last night, Kelly."

"Not me, Sergeant," Slot lied.

"Kelly, don't you never learn?" Captain Gazzo said.

Slot turned back, shrugged, and

walked to Captain Gazzo. From the scared look on the face of the owner of the La Bomba, and the grim faces of the cops, Slot knew this was not petty larceny. Gazzo and his boys were Homicide.

"Okay, Gazzo, how come Homicide's in on this?" Slot said.

"In on what, Kelly?" Gazzo asked.

Slot explained what he knew, and what Lieutenant Mathews had told him. But he did not mention the thirteen dollars to Gazzo any more than he had mentioned that to Mathews.

"Maybe you should ask Packy Chen," he said, "he's right outside."

Gazzo snapped to Jonas, "Take a look."

When Jonas had gone, Slot-Machine said, "Who's the stiff?"

"Name was Myrna Velton," Gazzo said. "She was a hooker. A hundred bucks gets you a happy night. At least, it did. Myrna ain't having no more happy nights. You know her, Kelly?"

"Big blonde, a real looker, shakes it nice and looks like maybe a hundred bucks a night is a bargain?" Slot said.

"That's her," Gazzo said.

"I didn't know her," Slot said.

"That was a good description."

"I seen her around," Slot said,

"she hung out in here."

"That's why we're here," Gazzo said.

"The owner there says he

doesn't know why she was killed."

"One of her customers maybe?" Slot said. "They came from all walks of life."

Gazzo nodded. "Could be. She was beaten to death, a drunk trick kills that way. How about you? You look like you'd pay for Myrna."

"When did I have a hundred bucks?" Slot said.

"You got a point," Gazzo said. "But it doesn't clear you."

Sergeant Jonas came back alone. Jonas looked at Slot-Machine and shook his head in mock sadness and worry.

"He was there," Jonas said, "but he spotted me and was long gone. Too bad, Kelly, with Chen after me I'd pay up my life insurance. After he gets you, we'll get him. How's that?"

"Thanks," Slot-Machine said. "You're being real generous—with my life."

"Okay, Kelly, beat it," Gazzo said. "Only sort of stay in town."

"You gonna check all her customers out?"

"We are," Gazzo said.

IV

SLOT LEFT. If he knew Myrna Velton, Gazzo would be busy for weeks checking out her paying lovers. One thing was sure, the thirteen dollars was beginning to look more and more like a very hot thirteen dollars. Myrna Velton was the woman he'd stolen the

money from. And Myrna was dead.

Slot went to a telephone and called Joe Harris. He got Myrna Velton's address. There wasn't a call-girl in New York Joe didn't know; it was part of the bartending business. Joe had supported both of them many times on the tips he got from steering customers to call girls.

Slot found the brownstone where Myrna had lived and climbed the stairs carefully. The door opened the first time he knocked. A small, pale-faced man stared at him. The man's eyes were red from crying.

"What the hell you want?" the man said.

"Myrna," Slot said.

"She's dead," the small man said dully.

"Yeh," Slot said. "I ain't a customer. I figure maybe I'm next on the list."

The man stared at him. Then the small man shrugged and waved him inside. The apartment was elegant and expensive. Call-girls do all right. But there was something about the room that was puzzling. It was a warm room, lived in, and there were pipes and other men's things around. The small man saw Slot looking at the place.

"We got four rooms," the man said. "We lived in these two. We was happy. I'm her husband. Sam Paxton, that's me. Myrna was Mrs. Sam Paxton. I loved her, you know?"

"You lived good," Slot said.

"I work," the man said. "I make money, but she liked expensive things. I mean, she liked a lot of money."

"Yeh," Slot said.

"It was her work. I didn't want to lose her, so I tried not to let it torment me too much. I kept telling myself it didn't count, it was just her work."

"What happened?" Slot said.
"The night she got it?"

The small man, Sam Paxton, sat down. "It was last night. He came in through the back entrance. I didn't see him, you know? I mean, I thought it was a customer, so I waited in here. But I heard—"

"Tell me," Slot said.

The small man shrugged. "He wanted something. I figured he was a customer at first. But then I heard them start arguing, and I recognized his voice. He'd been up before. I'd never seen him, you know, just the voice. So they started arguing. I heard the door lock click shut and then she started screaming.

"I could hear him hitting her. I tried to bust the door down, but it's a metal door. I half killed myself hurling my shoulders against it without realizing how hopeless it was. She just kept on screaming, and this guy kept yelling, 'Where is it! Don't lie to me! Where is it!' And I heard her say, 'It got stolen. How do I know!'

"By the time I made it around to the other door, and busted it down, she was dead and the guy was gone out the window and down the fire escape. She wasn't really dead yet. She died right after I found her. Her jaw was broken and she couldn't talk."

"You didn't see the man?" Slot said.

"No."

"Thanks," Slot said, and as he was leaving he turned and said, "Sorry, Paxton."

"Yeh," Paxton said.

And it had to be the thirteen dollars. Slot thought of poor Myrna Velton trying to convince someone she had lost the money. Paxton had said he knew the voice. So the killer had been with Myrna before. Probably a regular. And maybe the thirteen dollars was part of the money he had paid Myrna for her favors one night.

There could be no doubt at all that the killer wanted the thirteen dollars very badly. Chen could easily kill with his hands. Whoever Myrna's visitor had been he probably hadn't intended to kill her, and Packy Chen was strong enough to kill a woman by accident. Or a man. Slot knew one more thing. If it was Chen he had better find out why the big Chinese wanted that money before he met up with him again.

If Chen, or anyone else, got to him before he knew why, he wouldn't be able to talk his way out

of it. Myrna's slayer would kill him first, and take the money, and ask no questions. There was something about that money which left no doubt in Slot's mind that he had to get it back to the killer without the killer thinking he knew why it was so important. Protesting that he didn't know wouldn't save him. He'd never be believed.

After he left Paxton he took a cab down to the tavern where Joe worked. Joe was just going on duty. Slot sat down at the bar and didn't even ask for a whisky. He spread out the money and stared at it again. There was nothing unusual about any of it, except that gold seal on the one dollar bill.

"Hold it up to the light," Joe said.

"Maybe I should look for secret ink?"

"Why not?"

Slot sat up straight. "A message! Maybe that's it, but how?"

He studied all the bills. There was nothing about them that rang a bell. He studied the bills one by one, and found nothing. Until he took the gold-seal bill and stared at it a long time. Then he saw it! The serial number. *X 82622217A*.

Slot snapped, "Joe, what's the date?"

"August the second, why?"

"August the second, nineteen sixty-two. Right?"

"Last time I looked," Joe said.

"Okay, now listen," Slot said. "Call Mathews and Gazzo and tell



them to stay around their offices if they want something maybe big. Got that?"

"Where you goin'?"

"To try to give a dollar back to a killer," Slot said.

He had two stops to make first. If his hunch was right, it explained why Packy Chen had been working alone, and why Mike Booher had stated flatly that Packy wasn't doing anything. The one thing that had puzzled Slot all along was the secret way Chen had gone about committing mayhem and murder.

He headed straight for Mike Booher's restaurant. Lou Gotz was on the door as usual. Lou gave Slot a fish eye.

"Fly away, peeper, Mike ain't friends today," Gotz said.

"Listen, Gotz. I got a question that may be real important to Mike."

"So ask Mike."

V

"I ain't sure about it," Slot-Machine said. "When you called Packy out in Chicago, did you talk to Packy?"

Gotz laughed. "You got rocks in your head, shamus? You know better. Nobody talks to Packy when Packy's workin'. I got a message to him."

"How?"

"We got lots of ways to send messages, peeper," Gotz said.

"Yeh, I know," Slot-Machine said. He did not wait for more polite conversation. He knew it might not stay polite.

Slot-Machine's second stop was just as brief. He called on Eddie Purvis, the loan shark. Eddie shook his head when Slot asked for \$1,000. Slot-Machine wasn't surprised by that and settled for \$500. Eddie made it clear that payments must not be allowed to lapse and that interest was important. It was very high interest, about 100 percent if payments were made on time. But Slot needed the money too badly to worry about that.

Packy Chen had one weakness —poker. Chen knew every poker game in the city. Max Weller's game was Chen's favorite. A poker game was the only way Slot could think of to get the hot dollar back to Packy without turning Chen's suspicion that he knew too much into a dead certainty. Even that might not work, but it was worth a try.

THERE WERE five players in the game when Slot arrived. None of them were Mike Booher's men, but he was sure that sooner or later Chen would appear. As Slot walked in and took an empty chair, a man stepped out of the shadows, stared at him for a moment, and walked quickly out the door. Slot had an idea Chen would appear very soon.

"Dollar ante," Max Weller said. Max was his own dealer. It was a five card stud game, and they played for business here. "Big king, a ten, nine is fine, five for the ride, with a Jack, and the eight can wait. Sing, king," Max Weller chanted.

Slot had the Jack up and a nine down and he folded. The play went on. Slot folded every hand. Until the tenth deal after he got there.

"Ante the buck," Max called. "Deuce, big ace, with a trey, and spades the ten, the king is red, a queen. You got the handle, ace."

The ace bet five dollars. Slot looked under his red king, and stared at a second red king. He raised twenty. The ace saw, the three called, and the queen behind him. He decided the ace was sucking, the three had to be paired, and the queen could be.

Max called, "Seven for the ace, treys a pair, eight for the big king, ace to the queen. Treys says."

The pair of three showing bet fifty dollars. That had to be three three's already. Slot called with his kings. The queen-ace raised fifty. The ace-seven went out. The threes re-raised. Slot called and so did the queen-ace. Now Slot figured the queen-ace was not a pair of queens but an ace in the hole, a pair of aces. And there were no kings or eights showing.

"Ace for the treys," Max Weller called. "The kings are paired, the queens are paired. Take off, kings."

When Slot saw the black king drop on his showing red king he forgot why he was there. He bet fifty, the threes raised fifty, the pair of queens with an ace just called. Slot re-raised fifty. He knew he was betting against three three's and two pair, aces and queens, and with all the aces out he had a good chance. The threes and queens saw him.

"Queen for the threes," Max called. "An eight for the kings and two pair showin', a third queen on the board. Three ladies make the play."

Slot tried to look calm.

The three queens checked to him. He bet a hundred dollars, the three's went out swearing. The three queens showing raised him a hundred. He was just about out of money, so he only called. The queens showed a pair of aces for a full house. Slot showed his three kings with the two eights, the queens cursed, and Slot reached

for the pot. And he heard a sound behind him.

The door had opened and closed. Slot sensed the looming presence of a large man behind him. He raked in his money casually. Then, as if at random, he picked the gold-seal dollar from his pile and threw it in for the next ante. He heard a sharp intake of breath behind him, then a step, and a hesitation.

Max Weller dealt the cards. The man behind him seemed to be making a decision. Slot forced himself to sit casually, and he forced himself to look carefully at his hole card. He had a ten up and a three in the hole, but he raised twenty dollars on the first bet. He seemed to be intent only on his cards.

The light breathing behind him did not go away. There was a sudden stir of movement, and the man walked to the table, leaned over to say something to one of the players, and expertly palmed the gold-seal bill, dropping another bill in its place. It was done so quickly Slot would not have seen if he had not been watching. The man walked back behind Slot.

Slot's next card was a seven. He raised fifty and casually lighted a cigarette with his one arm. For a long second the person behind him did not move. Then there was a sense of someone going away, and the door opened and closed. Slot went weak inside and folded his

cards and stood up and walked out of the game without a word.

The street was empty. Slot did not even stop to count his winnings. He walked quickly to the nearest tavern and called Gazzo and Mathews. He told them to meet him at 221 Seventh Avenue right away.

He was waiting in the shadows by the time Gazzo and Mathews and their men arrived.

"What's up, Kelly?" Gazzo said. "It better be good."

"Packy Chen just walked inside there. I don't know which apartment."

He had been in the shadows when he had seen the big Chinese drive up, park a block away, and walk slowly back and into the building. Chen had been playing it very cautious.

"Why is he in there?" Mathews asked.

"I ain't sure yet," Slot-Machine said. "All I know is he's got an appointment there tonight. I've a hunch, though."

"Tell it," Gazzo said.

"Well," Slot explained, "it has to be big. Chen was real anxious to get back a certain dollar bill." He explained about the dollar bill, and Myrna Velton, and the poker game. "Mike Booher says Chen was out of town when the muggings and the killing took place. Lou Gotz says the same thing. I think they're telling it true. They really think Chen was out of town.

"Like Booher says, if he ordered Chen to get me I'd be out of circulation now. But I know it was Chen who jumped me and those other guys, so he has to be workin' for himself. That's why I'm still around. Chen's being real careful. If Mike Booher was out to mug seven men and a dame, he's got plenty of boys. He'd make sure the job was done quick and efficient. He wouldn't send just Chen, no matter how reliable Chen is.

"Lou Gotz admits he didn't actually talk to Chen out in Chicago. And the guy that fingered me at the game wasn't one of Mike Booher's boys. The way I figure it—Chen is on a private deal. He ducked back into town, and didn't want anyone to know about it. So he had a cover out in Chicago in case Mike called him."

"What private job, Kelly?" Gazzo said.

"Well, I ain't sure, but ten'll get you a hundred if Mike Booher don't show in the next ten minutes," Slot said.

"So what? So Mike and Chen are meetin' here, and—"

Mathews whispered, "Look!"

VI

A TAXI PULLED up near the building at 221 Seventh Avenue. A man got out. The man stood there in the light from the lobby and carefully looked up and down the street. It was Mike Booher.

"He got ten cars to use," Slot hissed, "why a taxi?"

"And alone," Mathews said. "He don't want anyone to know he's here."

"Stop him!" Slot cried. "Get him, quick!"

But by the time Gazzo had led them all to the building, Mike Booher had vanished inside. Gazzo rang a bell, the buzzer answered, and the cops went in. Slot heard Gazzo send men to ring every doorbell in the building. Slot stayed outside. It was a mistake.

The shots were so muffled they had to be silenced. There was a woman's scream. Slot looked up to the window on the fourth floor where the scream had come from. A big shadow was already more than half way down the fire escape.

Packy Chen came down the alley from the fire escape like a runaway express train. Chen had a very large gun in his hand. Later, Slot swore to Joe that he must have been temporarily insane. He never did find out what happened to the gun. He came out of the dark and caught Chen full in the throat with the edge of his one hand.

Anyone but Chen would never have gotten up again. Chen got up. The Chinese caught Slot under the chin with the heel of his hand. That blow would have killed Slot-Machine then and there, except that Chen was still gasping from Slot's blow. He was off balance,

and the stroke did not catch Slot full.

As he reeled backwards, Slot kicked Chen in the solar plexus. Chen gasped. Slot recovered and kicked Chen in the groin. The Chinese doubled over. Slot-Machine chopped Chen down with a karate blow to the back of the neck. Chen did not get up.

By that time the cops were all around Slot-Machine and he left them to take care of Chen. He went upstairs to the fourth floor. A beautiful, dark-haired woman was crying in a chair. On the floor the body of Mike Booher lay very dead.

"All right," Gazzo said, "tell me about it, Kelly."

Slot-Machine shrugged. "I told you most already. The whole deal smelled of Chen working for himself. I didn't think Mike Booher was lying, so Chen had to be lying. Why, you know? I mean lying to Mike Booher was dangerous business. Working alone when you are one of Mike Booher's boys was real bad. *Unless Mike was on his way out!*

"I mean, it would have to be real big for Chen to work on something Mike didn't know about. I couldn't figure it unless the stake was real big. And that dollar bill was important enough for seven muggings and a murder. The only thing I could think of that was big enough would be Mike on his way out, and Packy Chen on his way

in! I was just guessin', of course. I still am, but maybe the dame can tell us."

The beautiful woman looked at Slot-Machine. Her voice was low and dull. "I warned him. Poor Mike. He loved me, you know? He was going to get out, go somewhere with me. His wife wouldn't divorce him. He just wanted to get out of it all and be with me."

"And no one gets out," Gazzo said. "The big men overseas wouldn't like that."

Slot-Machine nodded. "That's about what I figured. Who knows, maybe Mike had made some mistakes already. A dame can mix up a guy. I guess we'll never know. Packy Chen won't talk. But just trying to run out with this dame would be enough to get the finger put on Mike."

"It was Lou Gotz who said it, those people have a lot of ways of sending messages. I figure Mike was real careful about visiting this dame. He thought he was safe, but they found out overseas somehow. They got word to Chen. Packy would kill his mother for the top spot."

"When the big boys overseas were ready for the hit on Mike, they had to tell Chen. They would usually send a messenger, but Mike Booher might have known a messenger. A messenger to Chen instead of to him would have warned him. The same goes for a letter. Mike could have spotted it.

"I've seen them use the numbers on a laundry list, the prices on a menu, cigarette packages, all sorts of ways. Anything that looks innocent and no one who isn't looking for the message would figure it out."

"It was the serial number on the dollar bill. *X 82622217 A*. It ain't easy to get a bill with just the right number, that's why they had to use one of those gold seal bills. It was all they could find that fitted. Most people wouldn't notice the seal."

"I figure the *X* was the tip-off it was the contract on Mike. The number was the message: *X 82622217 A*. August the second, nineteen sixty-two, at Two Hundred Twenty-One Seventh Avenue. No one except someone *looking* for the message would get it. Later, people would laugh if you cops said the serial number was a message. They picked the dame's apartment because they knew Mike always came alone. He was being real careful. It cost him."

"I warned him," the sobbing woman said. "I always told him not to come here alone."

"Dame's are always trouble," Slot-Machine said.

Gazzo shook his head sadly, "So Packy was double-crossing Mike. He won't talk, like you say, Kelly, but we got him cold anyhow. I guess Chen had to do the job himself. To prove he was tough enough, and he couldn't

trust anyone else. You guessed he lost the bill in Max Weller's poker game?"

Slot nodded. "Yeh. Chen never could think of anything else when he played poker. He probably tossed it into a pot without even thinking, probably was sure he had the winnin' hand. When he lost and saw what he'd done, he couldn't risk anyone guessin' what that bill meant.

"He faked that Chicago trip and traced the bill. I figure the guy who won it gave it to Myrna Velton, probably to buy coffee or cigarettes or some petty-cash deal like that. Chen found her but I'd already lifted the bill from the bar at La Bomba. Chen didn't believe her and beat her up. He just killed her by accident, he was too strong.

"Then he went after anyone who maybe *had* taken the bill from the bar. He wasn't sure which one of us had it. Only he had to play it careful, at least careful for him, or Mike might have gotten suspicious. Chen was supposed to be in Chidago."

Gazzo took Chen away. After Slot-Machine had made his state-

ment he headed straight for the tavern where Joe Harris was working. He told Joe the story. Joe agreed that Slot had been insane to tackle Chen.

"I'm still shakin'," Slot said. "I need medicine, make it a double Irish."

"Better have a triple," Joe said, "that one was close."

"Too close. I think I'll go straight."

"And the ocean'll dry up," Joe said. "How come Chen didn't blast you at that poker game?"

"Too many witnesses even for Packy," Slot said. "I counted on that. Besides, Mike Booher might have got wind and started thinking. I mean, Mike Booher didn't buy my story about Chen jumping me, he thought I was a dumb cripple. Too bad, it cost him big."

"It could of cost you big," Joe said.

Slot-Machine shivered. "Pour the booze. My skill at poker has made us rich."

Joe went for the good bottle. When he came back Slot-Machine was still shivering, but he was busily counting his poker winnings.



WATCH FOR—ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

ANOTHER BEAUTIFUL CLIENT

by MICHAEL AVALLONE



Noon was too startled to realize that a glamor brunette can be very sharp about accident insurance.

An ED NOON Story

I WAS JUST finishing my second cup of coffee in the Reno Airport Coffee Shop when I heard my name being paged over the Public Address system: "Will Ed Noon please report to the Information Desk?"

For one second, my pulses did the Twist. Who could want me in Reno? Especially since I had stepped off the New York-Reno jet flight only twenty minutes ago. It wasn't likely that Melissa Mercer, safe in my office in Manhattan, had suddenly stumbled onto something so urgent that she would need me. Puzzled, I paid my counter check and hurried out to the ultra-moderne terminal.

There was a smiling receptionist in a smart blue uniform waiting for me. She was set down in a circular marble booth like the cherry on a layer cake.

"I'm Ed Noon, honey. You were paging me."

Miss Information, a pretty blonde with a smile to match, ex-

tended a blue envelope. "A lady who was with you on Flight Seventeen left this for you. She said I was to give it to you after she had left the terminal."

I grinned. "What lady? There was no one on that plane but tired businessmen, noisy cowboys and two or three old ladies. Also, someone who looked like a schoolmarm."

The blonde shrugged. "All I know is this is for you. It was left by a stunning brunette in an outfit I can't afford on my salary. Don't you want the message?"

I took the envelope. There was no stunning brunette that I could remember. I shifted my two-suiter to another hand, walked over to a quiet corner and sat down. The receptionist wore a mocking smile. She had already classified me as a modest wolf who had scored a conquest in the blue.

There was a plain blue sheet of paper in the envelope. The message on it was bewildering.

Come to the Hotel Mapes as soon as you leave the airport. Don't take time to change. Wear exactly the same clothes you have on now. If you're interested, there's a lot of money to be earned by a smart private investigator.

Ava Trent

I fumed silently. Reno had seemed like a good idea for a week's vacation. I wanted to take in Harold's Club, look around, and drop in on some old acquaint-

ances at Scotty's Guest House. I wasn't in the mood for cases, games, or cryptic summonses from plane passengers I couldn't remember. There was no one on Flight 17 I could recall with particular clarity.

The truth was, I had slept most of the thousand air miles. I had mentally catalogued the passengers from force of habit. Hence the tired businessmen, the noisy cowboys, the old ladies and the schoolmarm. Of course, the verbal message given to the receptionist didn't have to be true. Still, it was unsettling. I felt my nerves and reflexes twisting again, the way they did on investigations.

Well, the Mapes was on the way to Scotty's, planted squarely in the heart of the Biggest Little City. I could ignore the whole business or go right to the heart of the matter. Knowing myself, it wasn't much of a contest. I'm a sucker for a mystery.

And stunning brunettes, be they fact or fiction.

"Maples Hotel," I told the Star taxi driver outside the airport. "And don't give me the twenty cent tour. I've been here before."

AVA TRENT was real. She was registered in a suite on the fourth floor. She was also a stunning brunette. Dark silver gleamed from a coil of hair wound tightly about an unforgettable head. High-bones, slash mouth and eyes

with whirlwinds in them. She wore a white cashmere sweater and a sheath skirt of midnight blue. The effect was something like a classic painting gone slumming. The frame was too modern for the old world beauty of her face and figure.

She let me into the suite with a tired smile and closed the door.

"The schoolmarm," I said. "Glasses and a bun hairdo and two-piece tweed suit. But I recognize you now."

"How?" she asked in a dusky contralto, waving me to a stuffed chair, her eyes approving of the tropical worsted suit and panama I had worn on the plane. "I spent a lot of time on that disguise."

"The mole, Miss Trent. The one on your cheek. That I *do* remember. I was too tired to think at the time but that stuck in my head somehow."

"Can't schoolmarms have moles?" she asked almost sadly.

"No reason not. Now, what's the mystery all about? Or is this just a very clever pass? Frankly, I haven't got that much ego."

She didn't get offended. She smiled and asked me a question.

"May I take your hat?"

That cleared up a few things for me. I took off my hat with a slow smile and ran my hand inside, around the hatband. My fingers brushed something that shouldn't have been there.

"I put it in your hat while you

were sleeping," Ava Trent said in a strange voice. "The stew had told me you were a well known detective.

When I heard your name, I remembered all I had heard about you. Your reputation.

The hat was on the seat next to you.

When I saw my chance, I took it. You'll understand why when I tell you the rest of it."

"It" was a certified check for fifty thousand dollars made out to Ava Trent and signed *Barry Durrell*. I put the hat back on my head and headed for the door. Ava Trent's beautiful eyes flew open.

"Where are you going—?"

"Lady"—I had my hand on the door—"I don't swing with Crime Incorporated or their girl friends. If Barry gave you that dough and now wants it back, no thank you. No prejudice, you understand. But I can't be Dear Abby for a crook's glamor playmate. Especially when *that* crook is Barry Durrell."

"Noon," she said. "Look."

I looked. The .32 in her slim, brown hand was as rigid as a ruler pointed at my tie. She looked like she knew how to use it. I stopped at the door and waited for her to say something.

"I'll give it your language, Noon. Fast. I hear you like it fast. I got that check from Durrell for five years of service. He gave it to me last week. And then the bot-

tom dropped out of some deal of his. He wanted it back. I said No. I took it and beat it out of town. I didn't have time to mail it or stash it. I got on that plane with one of his boys on my heels.

"I changed to the outfit before I got on the plane.

The ladies' room at La Guardia. And then on the plane, I began to think. What if he were waiting for me at Reno Airport? What if he guessed what flight I was on? Well, you were my chance and I took it. There wasn't anybody at the airport. But now I'm scared. I want to cash that thing—I'm not sure how—and get out of the country."

"So?" I asked. The one question worth asking.

"I watched you on the plane. The condition I'm in it wasn't hard to make up my mind. I'm yours, Noon, and ten percent of the money, too—if you'll fly to Mexico City with me. I need your protection that far, at least. It's too late to go back to Barry now. He'll kill me as soon as he gets his hands on me."

"Forget it, Ava. It's no good. You can't run forever. All he wants is the dough. Mail it back to him and I'll lay you any odds you want he'll forget the whole thing. Dough is the only thing that counts with hoods."

The .32 lowered slightly and her eyes raised approvingly...

"You're right, Noon. But they

like to even up scores too. They don't forget a cross. Barry would kill his mother if he had to." She stiffened her back. "Well, yes or no? I'm enough woman too, Noon, if you have to be told—"

I didn't have to. The dark eyes and the black mole were twin reminders of the woman that lay behind them. The sweater and the skirt and the golden brown coloring were warmer looking than the beach at Bikini.

But the door behind me opened and a man elbowed into the room and closed the door. Ava Trent squeaked desperately, didn't lose her head. But the .32 in her hand sagged.

"Smart girl," the man said. "You couldn't outshoot *this*. So hand over that check and let's end it all right here."

Even as I fell to one side out of the way, I could see the sawed-off shotgun jutting from the man's midriff. I didn't try anything. I just stood there and tried to think.

"Terry," Ava Trent said tiredly. "I might have known. How did you know where I was?"

"Barry Durell," the man said proudly, "knows everything. Like watching all bus depots, railroad terminals and airports. When I heard Ed Noon here being paged over the loudspeaker, it was just a hunch. Him being a private cop and all. But a good one, I'd say. Stay put, Noon and don't get cute."

I stayed put and didn't get cute.

"Now," Terry said again, no pride in his voice. "The check, baby. Hand it over."

Ava Trent moaned off-key.

Terry must have had something that I could only suspect and that Ava Trent knew. Because as Terry extended his hand for the check still dangling in Ava's left hand, she drew back from him instinctively. It was like a child reacting to Frankenstein.

Suddenly, Ava had screamed and brought the .32 up in sheer reflex. Terry growled. He was so busy worrying about her .32 he didn't have time to think about me.

I kicked him in the groin, tugging the sawed-off destroyer out of the cradle of his arm, barrel to the floor. It went off and peppered the rug like a tornado. Ava screamed and fired too. It was a madhouse of sound and confusion. Ava's shot went wild.

Splatter from the shotgun made Terry dance wildly out of the way. I forgot about Ava and snapped a bead on Terry. He saw the shotgun in my hands and clawed a .45 out of his coat. He was trying desperately to make up his mind about shooting it out when Ava Trent's .32 ended it all. A slug caught Terry high in the chest and slammed him back against the doorway. He blubbered like a baby, briefly, and then followed his falling .45 to the floor.

I got to Ava Trent before she could keep her finger on the trig-



ger. I roundhoused her to her knees with an open slap. Just in time. Terry was stumbling toward me, trying to drag me down with a death hug.

I sidestepped him and watched his corpse hit the floor. After that, things were pretty quiet except for the rumbling echoes in the room. Pistol ammo and shotgun shells make a helluva racket.

Ava Trent sobbed. "He could have killed us."

"Save it. You did all the killing."

She raised a stark, sneering face from her slim hands.

"You dumb bastard. You think he wouldn't have killed us once I handed over the check? Maybe not with a gun. Maybe he just would have pushed us out the window."

"Shut up," I said. "Let me think. What do we tell the Sheriff when he gets here? That's what we have to figure now—and fast!"

"Can't we forget it and get out of here?" She was starting to come apart again, trembling in the cashmere and the skirt.

"Listen—" I said.

From outside in the hallway, doors were slamming open, a man was yelling and somewhere a woman was screaming. The hotel had been aroused but good. It was only a matter of time until they pinned down the direction of all the gunfire.

I don't know when it was that Ava Trent decided to shoot me. Sometime between the death of Terry and her own monumental terror where Barry Durrell was concerned, the gleam started in her head and then worked down to her eye. It was pitiful really.

If I hadn't been holding onto the sawed-off shotgun, it would have been ridiculous. I would have been measured for a coffin just because I didn't have sense enough to avoid glamor brunettes in distress and piquant messages.

Something told Ava Trent she

could blame Terry on me and then go home to Poppa with the check he wanted so badly. Maybe I myself had convinced her she just couldn't run far and fast enough.

Anyway I had convinced her I wasn't going to help. Not with Barry Durrell, the check or anything.

I turned to say something to her and looked right into the .32 as she pointed it at me. The wild eyes had whirlwinds in them again. There wasn't time to ask her why or shoot graciously. It was me or her.

But I know women and not even self-defense would make a shotgun blast worthwhile. Ava Trent would not want to go through life with a marked face.

I flung the shotgun at her, broadside, its heavy length carrying full into her lovely face. She screamed incoherently and forgot about shooting me. She flung her hands up to protect her priceless face. I wasn't polite about the throw either. It had plenty of mustard on it.

The shotgun smacked solidly against her raised arms and slammed her beautiful figure against the wall like a rag doll flung carelessly. She collapsed in a moaning heap, screaming frightfully about her poor face. I retrieved the fallen .32 and the shotgun and let her cry her eyes out.

After that, there was nothing to do but call the police and report

the corpse that had checked in from the street.

Nobody in the world could be blamed for not believing my story. Least of all the Reno Police Department. And it had such a mixed-up look that if I hadn't known the Chief personally there would have been no telling how long the questioning might have gone on, or I'd have been kept in a cell as a material witness. As it was I had a tall story to tell.

"Ed—" Ava Trent wailed from a huddle on the floor. "Why won't you help me? I'll be good to you!"

"Sure," I said. "Shut up and let me think."

And I was only thinking of myself. A very tall story indeed.

All about an airplane ride, a certified check and this beautiful dame named Ava Trent who was on her way to Reno—"

Yeah. The cops would just *love* that one.



NEXT MONTH

THE CASE OF THE ARABELLA NUDE

A New ED NOON Novelet

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

A priceless object of art can arouse both greed and a savage kind of envy. In fact, the tiny lady in bronze would have needed murder insurance . . . if she hadn't been a statue!

STUDENT OF THE LANGUAGE



A brutal slaying presents Nick, newspaperman, with an uncommon problem—a lead for Death!

by H. C. NEAL

NICK NELSON, an easygoing open-faced fellow who earned his beans and bacon as a smalltown newspaperman, sat in his office scowling fiercely—an action markedly uncommon to his nature. He was coping with an uncommon problem.

He glared at his typewriter while the blank sheet of copy paper in it flickered mockingly at him in the breeze from the office fan. He then turned and glared impartially at his notebook, pencils, pastepot, dictionary—the tools of his trade.

Meeting no reaction, he swung his frustrated gaze to the wall clock.

It was a trifle more reactive than the other paraphernalia—it ticked backed at him. Commandingly. “Eleven-twenty,” it seemed to say, “forty minutes to go, Nelson. Get cracking!”

Nick did indeed have a peculiar problem. Here he sat with the darnedest open-and-shut killing he’d ever heard of, and he was baffled. Every murder had some sort of news angle to peg the story on, but this one had too many angles. That

© 1963, by H. S. Neal

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was the trouble. There was no mystery, no suspense, no shocking climax in the offing, nothing.

Nothing bothersome except the proper way to report the thing. There was the rub.

Nelson, who had a good deal of respect for the proper usage of the English language, was gifted with a semantic cleverness that marked all his work as outstanding. But this one was a real challenge. And he had less than an hour to file a story with his wire service that would merit front page play on this disarmingly brutal little slaying. He would settle for nothing less.

He'd called the bureau in the capitol city earlier, giving the bare skeleton of the story as protection from the opposition service. Speaking to Henry Culver, the rewrite man, he'd furnished this much:

"I've got a shooting here, Henry, a fatality. Weird. All I have right now is the vitals. Dame by the name of Reba Williams, age twenty-three, shot a guy in a cafe here about twenty minutes ago. Victim is Rocky Skidmore, age twenty-six, a two-bit no-good who probably had it coming. But here's the gimmick—as far as I can determine, they were utter strangers."

"Mistaken identity?" Culver asked.

"Don't think so, the way the sheriff talked."

"Then what's the motive?"

"Beats me," Nelson said. "That's what I'm working on now. I'm

heading for the bastille to talk with this babe soon as I hang up."

"Give me a wrap-up in about forty minutes," Culver said. "No later! We got some one o'clock clients who might want to frontpage this yarn in their early editions. And, Nick," he added, unnecessarily, "give us a good crisp lead on it, huh."

"Yeah, crisp," Nelson muttered, hanging up. That crisp lead was what had been evading him, like a drop of quicksilver, ever since the story first broke.

After a hasty, angry glance at the clock, he hustled over to the county jail where the sheriff gave him a quick fill-in.

"The way I get the story, Nick, this girl was sitting in the Prairie Sky cafe, alone, drinking coffee and minding her own business. That was around eleven o'clock. So then, Skidmore comes in. After eyeing this girl for a few minutes, he ups to her without no introduction or nothing and flat out asks her to go to a motel with him. Just like that."

"It figures," Nelson said. "From what I know of this boy, he isn't too deep between the ears."

"Right," the sheriff agreed, "so what does she do but dip into her little clutch bag, come out with one of them dainty little twenty-five calibre automatics, and let him have it right among the eyes. *Pow!* One blast, that's all. He's dead before he hits the floor, and she don't seem a bit sorry."

"I wouldn't say he exactly crept into her heart," Nelson said, writing rapidly in his own peculiar brand of shorthand. "Is she some local talent?"

"Nope, she just blew in from the west coast somewhere—brand new divorcee. Want to talk to her, Nick?"

"I sure do," Nelson replied, following the lanky lawman back to the cellblock.

Lounging on the sparse cot with bored indifference, Reba Williams

Nelson talked with her for several minutes. The gist of her story was that Skidmore was a perfect stranger—*no one is perfect*, Nelson thought idly—and that he had propositioned her without the slightest preliminary.

"I mean, he didn't even offer to buy me dinner, or anything," she recounted scornfully.

Her recent husband had beaten her often, she continued, she'd been pushed around by men quite enough, and Skidmore's callous ap-

Mike Shayne Leads Next Issue's Headliners with—

DEATH IN THE THREE-RING CIRCUS

Circus performers take many risks. But Shayne was alarmed by the number of shrouds that seem about to leave the weaver's hands.

By BRETT HALLIDAY

was a petite, strikingly beautiful redhead with racehorse legs and a torso to match. She also had luminous green eyes, Nelson noted. At the moment, she was showing just about as much remorse as you could giftwrap in an icecube.

After introducing himself with the same formal tone he would have accorded an indicted politician,

proach was the last straw. She'd shot him and she wasn't sorry.

When Nelson returned to the office to wrap up his story, the clock showed exactly 27 minutes before Henry Culver would be screaming at him on the long distance. His copious notes were a big help, and by the same token, no help at all. There were too many angles.

He sat down to the typewriter and wrote a tentative lead.

EDMUND, Okla. — Aug. 20 —
A trigger-tempered divorcee with flaming red hair and flashing green eyes shot a local police character to death in a nightspot here this evening, then admitted to authorities she didn't even know his name.

Nope, that wouldn't do at all. One of the spicier newsmags might buy it, but not the wire service. He tried again.

EDMUND, Okla. — Aug. 20 —
When ne'er-do-well Rocky Skidmore approached an attractive redhead in a downtown cafe here tonight with an immoral suggestion, he didn't dream that death was just a few seconds away.

That was even worse. After a moment's reflection, Nelson decided to swing to the other extreme.

EDMUND, Okla. — Aug. 20 —
A local man was shot to death in a downtown cafe here this evening, and authorities are holding an attractive divorcee for questioning.

Now that sounded just ducky—like it was custom written for the Girl Scout Journal. Nelson ripped the copy from his typewriter and swore fervently under his breath.

This was getting ridiculous. He needed a lead paragraph strong enough to grab the reader by the scruff of the neck and snatch him into the body of the story before he lost interest and turned to the sports pages.

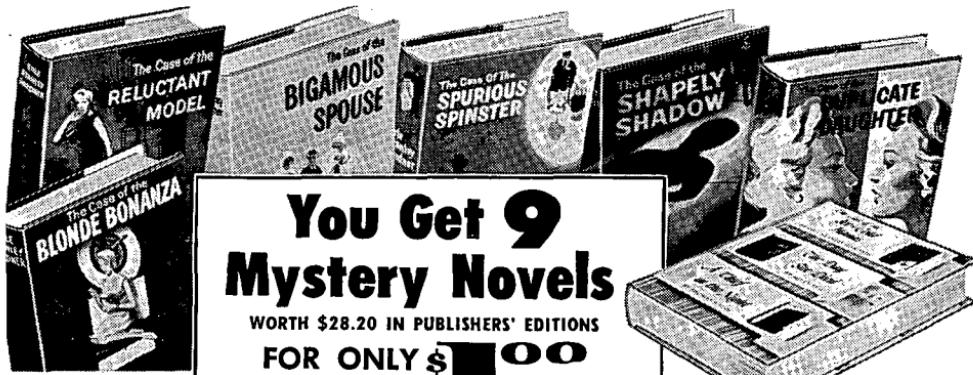
The frustrated newsman again glanced at the clock. Eleven twenty-eight. He scowled, then on sudden impulse, dialed the residence phone of the highschool principal. The schoolman, a longtime friend of Nelson's, had known the deceased Skidmore all through his futile student career.

His friend informed Nelson that Skidmore had flunked out before finishing highschool, and suggested that he call the school's English teacher. It seemed that the study of English had been the lad's worst Waterloo.

After making that call and chatting with the teacher a few moments, Nelson thanked her, hung up, and turned back to his typewriter with renewed vigor. This time he knew he had it.

The lead he wrote scanned beautifully—it was just what he needed. The copy fairly flowed from his fingers as the rest of the story practically wrote itself, thanks to that enchanting opening paragraph. Two pages. Three pages. Four. Finishing up, he quickly dialed long distance, got hold of an anxious Henry Culver, and began to dictate his story:

EDMUND, Okla. — Aug. 20 —
Rocky Skidmore, 26, an underworld fringe character who was never noted as a student of the language, ended his life sentence here tonight with a proposition. Etc, etc, etc . . .



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